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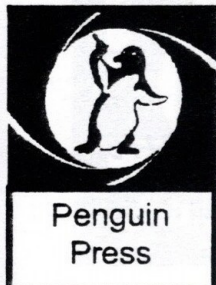
Daydreams & KNIGHTMARES

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Artwork by Ann Larimer



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editorial

Okay, so let me 'splain

Last year I was getting together my stuff for MediaWest when I heard that there was going to be an FK party at Baycon hosted by Karin Welss and Marian Gibbons. Unfortunately, Baycon was in California and MediaWest is held in Lansing, Michigan.

It wasn't fair. So I concocted a small practical joke to play on the Baycon party-goers.

It was a story. A very sweet and ubiquitous story—wouldn't hurt a fly, this story.

For the first six pages. Then it got very dark and deep and nasty

Of course, just when the reader reached the end and they were ready to have me eviscerated or thrown into a version of Clive Barker's dementia, they were informed there was *another* version of the story. The *nice* version. The version that wasn't at all like the first one.

I did this to some people with another story once before, just for a lark. And Karin agreed to try it out on the Baycon crew (she isn't a Cousin for nothing, this one). In fact, she was such a sweet soul, she printed up copies for them to take home so they could relive the torment.

Well, now you can relive the torment, too. The two party favors—"assignment: Knight" and "A Knight in Hell," are part of this collection.

Karin doesn't deserve condemnation for having perpetrated such cruel fiction on an unsuspecting audience at my behest (that's what friends are for). I couldn't resist temptation. If you were ~~unfortunate~~ lucky enough, you received the story and instructions when you passed by my dealer's table at last year's MediaWest—"Read this and bring it back to me when you're done." Of course, I handed them the dark story first.

And they *always* came back. In fact, they often asked if they could spring the story on other people. I've been told at least seventeen people at last year's convention were traumatized by their so-called friends in just such a manner.

It makes you concerned for the health and well-being of the populace at large, it surely does.

Susan M. Garrett

SusanG2522@aol.com or susang@vitinc.com

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

By Sharon Himmanen

“Is this someone I should meet?”
LaCroix asked, gazing up at
Alyce, distracted.



Nick chose that moment to act, pushing himself up off the floor and launching himself at LaCroix, slamming into him with as much force as he could muster, sending them both to the across the room and onto the floor. He was dimly aware of two things: the faint clatter of the jade cup as it slipped from LaCroix's grasp and the clacking of Alyce's heels against the metal walkway as she ran from the slaughterhouse. But then there wasn't time to think. LaCroix was on his feet first and he seized Nick by the front of his shirt, hauling him up and slamming his knee into Nick's stomach as Nick made a feeble grab for LaCroix's neck. He gasped for breath, nearly doubling over, but before he could recover himself, LaCroix swung him around and threw him into a nearby wall. Stunned, Nick slid to the floor, unable to move.

As if from a great distance he heard LaCroix approach him, heard him speaking to him, but it wasn't until he felt something metal touch his hand, flinging it off of his chest where it had fallen, did he begin to understand what LaCroix was saying. "There

are four ways to kill a vampire," LaCroix said. "Fire, the sun, a stake through the heart. All these will work my friend. And one more." LaCroix raised his hand abruptly over his head, the metal meat cleaver gleaming and said "Decapitation!" As his arm dropped sharply Nick sat up, eyes gold and fangs bared. Without conscious thought he lashed out with his foot, catching LaCroix squarely in the abdomen before he could deal out the lethal blow.

The next thing of which Nick was aware was a sickening thud. He looked up in the direction LaCroix had been flung and saw his former master hanging limply from a rack, his body pierced by several large metal spikes. Numbly, Nick struggled to his feet. Staggering forward, he stood in front of LaCroix and looked up at his body, feeling dazed, unable to think or comprehend. In confusion, he watched the meat cleaver slip from LaCroix's grasp and fall to the floor with a clang. Nick reached up and gingerly touched the metal spike that protruded from LaCroix's chest, then slowly lowered his hand, staring at it in wonder. LaCroix did not breath, did not move. He simply hung there like a puppet whose strings had been abruptly cut.

The cup. Nick blinked rapidly, then whirled as he remembered the sound of it clattering across the floor, but he had lost track of it during their struggle. Moving back into the center of the room he carefully searched the gloom until he spotted it. It had rolled into a corner and was now tucked between two large barrels. Miraculously, it was still whole, complete.

Nick's hands shook as he slowly reached down and gently picked the cup up, hefting it in his hand. He glanced back over his shoulder at LaCroix, then looked down at the cup, closing his fingers around it. He breathed a long sigh of relief that ended in a small shaky sob, then he turned and strode out of the slaughterhouse, moving past LaCroix with one last glance up at him, his heart torn between regret that this couldn't have ended differently and joy that he had the other cup, that he was so close to finding his cure.

Still clutching the jade cup in his right hand, Nick ran out into the early morning sunlight. Instinctively he threw up his arm to shield his face as his skin began to smoke, but he lowered it almost immediately as the jade cup slipped from his fingers. It was only his vampire reflexes that allowed him to catch the cup before it fell to the concrete, before it shattered into a thousand pieces. The irony of that was not lost on him, but he'd come too far to lose this opportunity now.

But the lethal sun was burning his face and hands. Nick carefully tightened his grip on the cup and ground his teeth against the pain. Stumbling in the direction he remembered his Caddy being, Nick threw up his free arm to block the direct sunlight from his face. He didn't see the boxes and garbage cans that were in his path until he fell over them, yet somehow managed to hold the cup aloft and out of harm's way.

His vision was severely blurred and distorted but he could just make out the green of his car a few feet to his left and so he moved desperately toward it, leaning with relief against the hood. Feeling his way along the length of the car, he made his way to the trunk which he hastily popped open. Curling his hand protectively around the cup and clutching it to his chest, he rolled into the trunk, hastily blocking out the deadly rays by slamming the hood down over him.

In the quiet darkness he lay, breathing heavily for several long moments. His skin still smoked and burned. It had been many hours since he'd last fed so the wounds were slow to heal, but he could feel it starting. Cautiously he opened his fingers and looked at the cup in awe. It was still intact.

And it was his.

After all this time he had finally succeeded. He had beaten LaCroix. Not . . . not killed him, Nick realized as he closed his eyes, allowing his mind to cautiously touch his connection with LaCroix. It was

faint, but it was still there. LaCroix was weakened but not dead.

Nick opened his eyes, pulling back quickly from his connection to LaCroix, and stared down at the cup in his hands. He was suddenly lost in memories of Altun Kanal, how his desperate excavation for the cup and his quest to understand the ceremony had again been thwarted by LaCroix. He remembered the workers huddling around the fires, talking about the curse, the vampire that was plaguing them. They had been terribly frightened and Nick had found it increasingly difficult to keep them working, to keep them busy unearthing artifacts and the stone tablets that would tell him how to use the cups once he found them. Then, one evening they'd found the foreman dead, drained of blood and with a broken neck like the others, and the workers had fled. He'd heard LaCroix's laughter echoing over one of the nearby hills as he'd stood amidst the chaos of the abandoned dig and campsite, again alone and with nothing to show for all his efforts.

But not this time, Nick realized. He'd have to perform the ceremony quickly, before LaCroix could regain his strength and attempt to stop him. He had blood in his loft, as well as the other cup. He could do it tonight, then be well on his way by dawn. As a mortal.

Suddenly Nick grinned, lifting his other hand to gently trace the marking on the cup with his finger. Once LaCroix had forced him to give up that particular search he hadn't had the heart for anything associated with Altun Kanal, leaving the translation of the Mayan tablets to colleagues at Oxford. And LaCroix's activities at the sight ensured that the Enforcers would not tolerate a vampire's activities in those parts, no matter how careful and concealed, for decades to come. So he'd turned his attention to another possible cure he'd heard about during his travels, a cure said to be contained in a book of cures called the Abarat. But now he was closer than he'd ever been before. Nothing, not even LaCroix would be able to stop him now, he thought, as he again cradled the cup against his chest. Leaning his head back, he closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. It was time to sleep now, to rest. By this time tomorrow, he would be mortal again.



Nick started out of a sound sleep, instinctively sitting up and slamming his head hard on something metal. He looked around him in confusion, trying to remember just why he was in this cramped dark space. Then he heard a familiar voice. As the car bounced up and down again, Nick heard Schanke rambling on about the summer of 1976. That and the smooth feel of the jade cup in his hand helped him to remember.

Vaguely he remembered the lurch of his car when a tow truck had come and taken the car in. Nick remembered parking it illegally the night before and there hadn't been time to move it this morning. By now it must be sometime in the early afternoon, he realized. They'd probably figured out whose car this was and sent someone down to fetch it. That it was Schanke irritated him, especially when he heard Schanke call into dispatch saying he was going to 'tool around' in his car. But there was little he could do about it without having to answer a lot of uncomfortable questions.

Then with a grin he realized that answers to a lot of those questions would, in all likelihood, be unnecessary tomorrow, and he nearly laughed in joy. Double checking to make sure the cup was still safe, Nick rested his head against his arm again, and prepared to simply wait out the rest of the afternoon until it became dark enough for him to venture out. So happy was he that he decided that he didn't even mind that Schanke was driving his car around town.

Well, almost.



Clapping his hands tightly over his ears, the cup lying next to him momentarily forgotten, Nick growled "God, Schanke! I'm gonna kill you!" He felt the Caddy accelerate as they began to move down an incline. Nick licked his lips nervously, then his body was slammed to the side as the car swerved sharply. Several horns blared, but before Nick could gather his wits he was flung to the other side of the trunk as Schanke tried to maneuver out of the way of another oncoming vehicle.

It was then that he remembered the cup. Frantically, he searched the space around him for the cup, but before he could locate it, he was again flung backwards as the car sideswiped a fire hydrant. Nick was dimly aware of a green blur moving toward him as he pushed himself up onto his elbow, but before he had time to react something hard and solid smacked him squarely between the eyes. Tears of pain gathered in his eyes, but he hastily wiped them away with his sleeve, his only concern for the cup.

He found it sitting pretty much where it had been before the brakes had failed, for he was certain that's what had happened. The cup was resting next to him, to his left. Snatching it up, he hastily ran his fingers over it checking for chips or cracks. Although the spot where it had impacted with his face throbbed and his eyes still watered he used his vampire sight to detect any flaws. After carefully examining the cup for several long moments he breathed a sigh of relief and hugged it to his chest.

The car had finally rolled to a halt, and Nick heard Schanke walking around the car again and again, moaning. He wanted nothing more than to get out and strangle his partner. Luckily for Schanke the sun was still up. Instead he gingerly raised his hand to his face, wincing when his fingers contacted a large bump forming between his eyes. It was probably turning purple, too, he realized. Between that and the burns which were only half-healed he knew he'd probably make a pretty scary sight if he were to emerge from the trunk now. Hopefully, though, they'd be mostly gone in a few hours when the sun went down.

For now there was little he could do except lie there and wait. For the second time in the same day he heard the familiar roar of a tow truck, felt his car lurch then begin moving as it was attached and hauled away. And the driver had used some pretty colorful language when he'd seen the damage, which only caused the lump between Nick's eyes to throb even more than it did already.



Still clutching the cup, Nick cautiously opened the hood of the trunk, then slipped out, dropping lightly to the ground. He fought down a momentary wave of dizziness, then reached up and slammed the trunk closed. He was standing in a cluttered garage, the sounds of drilling and welding, of engines filled the space nearby although there were only a few people around. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of dents and scratches marring the surface of his car, then he heard Schanke muttering to himself.

Holding onto his anger and keeping himself tightly controlled, Nick slowly surveyed the damage to his Cadillac with Schanke, who looked pale and only a slightly lighter shade of green than the car. Crouching down, however, he carefully fingered the sabotaged break line, then rose unsteady to his feet and walked forward a few steps. He was suddenly overcome with such a wave of dizziness that he lowered his head and leaned against the Caddy for support. Suddenly Schanke was there, clutching his shoulder, asking him if he was all right. Wearily, Nick lifted his head and nodded, pushing himself upright and trying not to get nauseous at Schanke's offer of souvlaki.

Schanke wrapped a supportive arm around him and began leading him from the garage, babbling about the case and what he had tried to discover at the hospital. Nick only half paid attention until he felt Schanke take the cup from his grip.

"What's this?" he asked, turning it over in his hands as Nick attempted to snatch it back. Schanke laughed. "It looks like Myra's first attempt at ceramics. Thank God she got out of that phase. Do you have any idea what it's like to eat gazpacho soup out of a lopsided bowl with a big nose on it?" As he spoke, Schanke carelessly waved the cup around, despite Nick's protests, then held it up and peered into it, making a face. "Have you been drinking tomato juice out of this or what? That's nasty."

In exasperation, Nick snatched the cup from him and stuffed it into his coat pocket. "Schanke," he said, "I want you to go to the hospital. Find out if anyone's . . . I don't know, had something bad happen recently, some kind of tragedy that might have sent them over the edge."

"What?" Schanke asked. "Nick, haven't you been listening to a word I've been saying? I just got done telling you I was just there. They won't talk to us. Not without a warrant."

"We don't need a warrant," Nick said. "All the victims were blood donors."

"How do you know that?"

"Dr. Kipper told me."

"Ah, so that's where he was," Schanke said, nodding his head. "What are you going to do?"

"I've got something I need to take care of," Nick said, moving hastily away from Schanke. "I'll check in with you later, OK?" Without a backward glance he strode quickly toward the door, ignoring Schanke's protests. Once he was sure he was out of sight, he pushed the cup more firmly into his pocket, securely zipping it. Then, using sheer determination and willpower despite his semi-weakened state, he took to the air and headed for his loft as quickly as he could.



His loft was deserted, he could sense that from the air above it, and he alighted softly near the door that led to the lift. The flight here had seemed like the longest one of his life, and he was certain he was going to drop the cup out of his pocket at any second. In fact, he'd been so nervous he'd even considered landing and taking a cab back to his loft, but decided that he simply couldn't wait. And besides, the way cabbies drove, both he and the cup might just be safer in the air.

But now he was home. Pulling the cup out of his pocket, he was again reassured that it was in one piece. Walking into the loft, he immediately sought out the other one, which was still sitting on the table he'd left it on the night before. He held the two cups, one in each hand, looking from one to the other, hardly daring to believe that he was this close to crossing that final threshold.

Smiling to himself and holding the two precious containers carefully, he walked into his kitchen and set them both on the counter. During the excavation he'd gotten a pretty good idea of the ceremony. One had to pass the blood back and forth between the two cups, then drink it. Well, he had plenty of blood, he thought, as he turned and opened the refrigerator. Then he stopped. If this did indeed work, this might be the very last time he'd be opening his refrigerator to take out the blood he'd need to survive. The thought overwhelmed him for a minute as he stood there staring at the green bottles. Then he reached in and slowly took out one that was only half full, raising it to his mouth and pulling out the cork with his teeth.

The smell of the blood momentarily overwhelmed him and reminded him of how long it had been since he had fed, how hungry he was. But Nick pushed aside the hunger and again approached the two cups. All he'd have to do is pour blood into one, pass the blood back and forth between the two cups, then drink it.

And he'd be mortal again.

Carefully, Nick tilted the bottle over one of the cups and poured about half of it into the jade cup. Setting the bottle aside, Nick took a deep breath, then reached out and took both cups in his hands. He looked down into pouring it back into the first one. Setting the now empty cup onto the counter he raised the one filled with blood to his lips.

Again he hesitated, and he wasn't quite sure why he was suddenly so filled with fear. If this worked he would have the thing he most desired, the thing for which he'd spent the last century searching. He would regain his mortality and re-enter the world of the living, he would feel the sunlight on his face, he would be able to love a woman without fear or guilt. Other less appealing thoughts crowded his mind, thoughts of sickness, of death, of dying. The faces of all the people Nick had known throughout his long life, ravaged by age, by disease, expiring sick and alone rose up before his eyes. And as he looked upon them, seeing first the faces of his family and peers, then other faces through different ages, different times, briefly, just briefly, he wished he'd never found the cups. Or better yet, never agreed to LaCroix's offer in the first place, never known immortality, never cheated death. Nick blinked and swallowed hard, the horrible, twisting visions fading until there was just himself standing in his kitchen.

Quickly, before any more doubts or misgivings could stay his hand again, he tilted his head back and drained the cup in one quick swallow.

His hands trembled as he lowered the cup, and he stood there for a long time with his eyes closed, expecting a great bolt of lightening, some profound change that would mark his death as a vampire and his rebirth as a living, breathing man.

He waited, but there was no sudden metamorphosis, no transformation. At least none that he could sense. He was still oblivious to ambient temperature although he knew that by mortal standards his loft was considered cold. His heart was still, gave a single beat as he stood there expectantly, then fell silent again. When he opened his eyes he still saw all the details of the world, its flaws and perfections with a vampire's eyes.

He was not changed. He was not mortal.

The cups had failed him.

For a moment Nick was filled with a disappointment and an anguish so profound he nearly lost all strength in his limbs. The ritual had not given him back his mortality as promised. It had only served to stoke the fire of his hunger. Angrily, he stalked to the refrigerator and yanked out a full bottle of blood, pausing only long enough to pull the cork out with his teeth before tilting it to his lips and drinking greedily. He did not stop until the bottle was empty, then he dropped it to the floor, ignoring the sound of shattering glass as he reached in and took out another one.

He finished the second bottle, and was halfway through a third when a thought occurred to him, renewed his hope. Lowering the bottle he sat it on the counter and took a step back from it, almost in disgust before turning to the cups again. "Cow blood," he muttered to himself. It suddenly occurred to him that the ritual might require human blood. That had to be why it hadn't worked, Nick thought to himself. That had to be it. Although he subsisted on an exclusive diet of cow blood Nick knew that vampires drew the most strength and nourishment from human blood. It enhanced their strength and their body's ability to heal itself quickly and efficiently. That was why he always kept a supply of human blood on hand in his freezer, for emergencies. In fact, he had to constantly remind himself to replace them once they expired—stale blood was decidedly unpleasant, especially if one was using it to aid in healing. Fortunately, this batch was only a few weeks old.

It could serve another, more important purpose, now.

He knelt down, mindful of the broken glass, and opened his freezer. Reaching in, he grabbed one bag

and tore off the top. He pulled a coffee mug out of his cupboard and dumped the frozen contents into it, then used the microwave to thaw it. He hardly ever used the microwave, preferring to punish himself and make the blood even more unpalatable by simply drinking it cold, straight out of the refrigerator.

As before, he carefully poured the steaming blood from the coffee mug into one of the jade cups, and again poured the blood back and forth. As he raised it to his lips he made an effort to keep thoughts of failure at bay. He didn't know what he'd do if this failed as well, he couldn't think about it. So he drank instead, trying not to notice how the warm blood, unaccustomed to it as he was, burned his lips and mouth. His recent feeding caused that to heal instantaneously and he drank until the cup was empty.

And again he waited.

Nothing.

Nick wanted to strike out in frustration, in anger. This was no cure, he thought to himself in disgust. This had to be nothing more than the ranting of a primitive race, a society that had allowed itself to be governed by mythology, by empty truths and empty rituals. A race that deserved to be extinct, Nick thought bitterly, as he placed the cup back on the counter. He silently cursed the Mayans and their priests, silently condemned the archaeologists who had excavated the site. They had robbed him of his hope, all of them.

He wanted to break the cups, throw them against the wall and shatter them into a thousand pieces. He even picked one up and drew his arm back, ready to let it fly. But something stopped him, some reverence for the past that he still held onto despite his disappointment. No, he wouldn't destroy the cups. He'd keep one as a reminder to himself, a lesson in disappointment, in failure. The other he would return to Alyce, for the museum's collection . . .

The thought of the museum curator caused him to pause and he stared back down at the cups, hope flaring however briefly in his chest. Alyce might be the key; she had researched the Mayans, had studied the site, the artifacts in more depth than he. She might know more of the ritual, some vital piece that he was leaving out. She might be able to explain to him why it had failed.

Struggling to keep his renewed hope in check, for he did not think he could handle a third disappointment this evening, he walked over to the phone still holding one of the jade cups. The indicator was blinking—he had several messages. He decided that they could wait until later, that they could not possibly be as important as this, and dialed Alyce's office number from memory. It rang several times, then an answering machine picked up. Nick tried desperately to keep the disappointment over not reaching her out of his voice.

"Alyce, it's Nick Knight. I need to speak with you immediately. It's vitally important." Before he hung up, he left his home phone number, hoping that she would call back, that she hadn't been permanently scared off last night by what she had witnessed in the slaughterhouse, but afraid that that was exactly what had happened. If she didn't call him back in a few minutes, then he would go to the museum and look for her.

The door to stairwell suddenly opened and Nick stared in horror as LaCroix entered the room, a satisfied smirk on his face. He wore all black and he had a large book tucked under one arm. He looked none the worse for wear despite what had happened to him last night.

"Steel spikes can't kill a vampire, Nick," he said softly, walking toward him. "But you already knew that, didn't you," he said, almost conversationally. "Ah, yes." LaCroix indicated the cup Nick held in his hand with a slight nod of his head. "The cups." Then he looked questioningly at Nick, his face wearing an expression of mock puzzlement. "And here I thought you would have rushed home to . . . cure yourself," he said, his tone and look turning ugly at the words. "Or," he continued, then paused and looked at Nick

who stood silent, "is it that you've already tried it? What? It didn't work? Is that why you just tried to call Alyce?"

"Leave her out of this," Nick managed to growl at LaCroix, taking a step forward.

LaCroix chuckled and turned his back on Nick. He walked into the living room. "Actually, I've just come from a nice little . . . academic discussion with Doctor Hunter. It was very enlightening. She confirmed some of my own findings on a certain matter." LaCroix took the book out from under his arm and offered it to Nick. "She wanted you to have this," he said, before Nick could move, and his eyes held a look of warning. "Take it. It contains some information on the ceremony you're so desperate to perform."

Nick looked warily at LaCroix and the offered book. "You killed her," he stated, flatly.

LaCroix shook his head. "Not at all. In fact, I've granted her fondest wish, the same wish I granted for you, just as I am doing again, Nicholas." LaCroix opened the book and leafed through several pages before finding the one which interested him and pausing. "I *want* you to have this. I *want* you to perform the ceremony."

Nick stared at him incredulously, his mind barely able to comprehend what LaCroix was saying to him, still fearful that this was a trick, a trap of some sort. But he couldn't stop himself from asking, hopefully, "You're going to let me go?"

In response, LaCroix held the book out to him again and looked at him expectantly. Nick hesitated for only a moment more, then reached out and took the open book from LaCroix's outstretched hand. With one last wary look at LaCroix, Nick glanced down at the page LaCroix had turned to and began to read. As he did so, LaCroix began pacing around the room. "It's a very interesting ceremony," he said. "And once you read that it will become obvious to you why your earlier attempts failed. You see," he said, moving over to the fireplace and fingering the carvings there, his tone professorial, "you were going about it all wrong. Oh, you had the right idea. You do have to pass the blood from one cup to the other. The key is in the blood you put into the cup. It can't be just *any* blood. It has to be obtained in a very specific way."

As LaCroix spoke, Nick quickly scanned the page and as he read the description of the ceremony, LaCroix's words began to make sense. Nick closed the book in horror and slowly looked up at LaCroix as he began to laugh. "You see, Nicholas, you must rip the heart from your human *sacrifice* and while it's still beating, squeeze the blood from it into one of the cups. *Then* you pass the blood back and forth between them." He paused and smiled at Nick, his eyes gleaming. "It's all spelled out in that volume. Page 143 I believe," LaCroix added, then stopped and shook his head as Nick reached down and picked up the cup he had carried with him from the kitchen.

"You see, Nicholas," LaCroix said, taking another step toward him. "This cure might very well work. But your own foolishness, your own ridiculous high ideals, your refusal to be what you are will keep you trapped in this life you claim to hate so much. Oh, yes, by all means, cling to your cumbersome morality and all the misery and guilt it causes you," LaCroix sneered. "The cure for what ails *you*, Nicholas, isn't in the promised mortality that these cups offer. It will come in the realization that the price isn't too high, that a mortal life isn't worth worrying about, worth agonizing over." He paused and glared intently at Nick, before continuing, his voice soft, soothing. "When you get to that point, Nicholas, you'll be cured. You'll be cured. You won't want to be mortal. You'll be one of us again."

He contemplated Nick carefully, then added, "But either way, I win. Again." He stood beside Nick, looking down at the cup for a moment, then began chuckling to himself.

As LaCroix departed, the echo of his laughter was drowned out by another sound, Nick's whispered, "Never . . .," and then the shattering of the jade cup as it slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor.

EVER AFTER

By Susan M. Garrett

the only



sound was the continual whisper of the night wind through the grass. It would have to be cut soon—too tall in places, obscuring the older, abandoned headstones. But that wasn't her concern. She didn't care about the hidden markers or the bodies that had once rested beneath them, which had since turned to earth and bone, the flesh having fed worms that had lived and died, generation after generation.

Natalie could almost smell the musty after-scents of time and death. But the wind picked up again, the whistle through the grass and the clatter of the empty tree branches covering the sound of her footsteps. With the wind came the smell of moist earth, the memory of a rain that had ceased falling not long ago and threatened to fall again. Even the moon seemed shy tonight, darting from sight behind the clouds and shining only briefly before disappearing again.

Again, it wasn't her concern—there was no grass on the grave she sought. Even the rain couldn't raise the green from freshly turned earth. Despite the expansion of her world, the rules of science that had bent and broken beneath the weighty knowledge—and proof—that such things as vampires existed, there were some truths that remained universal. Nothing came from nothing. That was the way of

things.

"It was a lovely service."

Natalie stopped herself from turning, fixing her eyes on the headstone. Even in the dark the lines seemed sharp, the edges fresh and unworn. "You were there?"

Only then did she look over at Janette. Her customary black was suitable for the time and place—although the strapless dress seemed just a bit flashy for a woman in mourning. Natalie had to admit that the veil was a nice touch, the barest flicker of black lace attached to a comb in her hair.

Janette endured her gaze, frowning. "Really! Don't be foolish." But then she took a step toward the grave and Natalie saw that she held the stems of several lilies in her hand. Kneeling by the turned earth, she placed the flowers carefully. "It's the correct thing to say. All services are 'lovely.' One gets used to them in time. Part of the ritual." Having placed the last flower, she brushed the petals with the fingers of her black gloves, the hands beneath the lace almost as white . . . if less pure. "And you?"

Natalie bit back a slight smile. "I was . . . indisposed."

"In the past, I've found 'overcome with grief' works well." Janette rose to her feet, then lightly brushed the dirt from the edge of her dress and her knees. "It does tend to merit a little more sympathy. And, if they've any sense, a bit more time to yourself. Upon occasion, that time can be very valuable."

"I'll remember that."

"See that you do." She touched her fingers to her lips through the veil, staring down at the stone—then Natalie felt those blue eyes on her, their intensity hardly diminished by the lace. "Perhaps you think I've been unsympathetic?"

"No. I understand. You've had . . . other things to work out." Natalie bowed her head, staring down at her shoe-tops. "I haven't really stopped to think, I suppose. Ever since the accident—there hasn't really been time." Then she looked up, managing a slight smile. "But I appreciate everything you've done for me. I don't think I could've managed on my own."

Janette reached out to touch her shoulder, after a moment of hesitation. "It becomes easier. No less annoying, but . . . you're prepared. You know what to do, the next time it happens." She withdrew her hand as if disturbed by the ease of the sudden familiarity and turned her back to Natalie, looking around the quiet graveyard. "I think I'll miss this place. The club, at least . . . well, it's like so many other clubs. But this time it was special. And the others there—it's been some time since I've had such a mix."

There was regret in her voice, but it was tossed aside with a light laugh and a shrug. "Will you open another, somewhere else?" asked Natalie.

"I'm not sure. In a decade, perhaps." There was another shrug and Natalie saw the sparkle of pearl-white teeth beneath the veil, as Janette laughed again. "When I find a location that draws the handsomest men and prettiest women. Otherwise, there's no point, really."

It seemed wrong to be laughing in this place, at this time. Almost . . . impolite. Or disrespectful. But there was something in Janette's manner that lightened her heart a little, as if she shouldn't take this, or anything else, too seriously.

Natalie turned her eyes on the surrounding landscape, a field of graves and stone mausoleums and trees and shrubs, looking for . . . what *would* she see?

In a heartbeat, Janette was beside her, whispering in her ear. "Don't be impatient, *cherie*. He'll come in his own time."

"But . . . how long should we wait?"

"As long as it takes." Janette's hands were on her shoulders. She could easily make out the features beneath the flower-patterned lace veil, as she turned her head and met that blue gaze. "There's much to

do. Much to prepare." Lightly, her hand patted Natalie's shoulder, then she moved away again. "As I said, you'll get used to it, in time."

"In time." Her words were swept away by the wind, but Janette nodded in response, having heard.

For the moment, nothing more needed to be said. So Natalie contented herself with trying to memorize the place—from the dark branches that scraped against the darker sky, to the scent of the turned earth and the flash of the moonlight on the newly hewn gravestone. It was too easy now, to recall passing instants like flipping through photos in a picture album. Too easy to remember.

And, oh, so difficult to forget.

A rustle of cloth on the wind heralded his arrival. Natalie found herself holding her breath—even though she no longer needed to breathe—and looking around. But by that time he'd landed.

LaCroix strolled out of the darkness toward them. With a glance, he seemed to dismiss the gravestone, although his eyes lit momentarily at the sight of the flowers. Janette received a nod, while Natalie was treated to a grim smile. "Ladies." He walked past Natalie and bent low, picking up one of the lilies. After a questioning glance toward Natalie, he met Janette's eyes . . . and seemed to find his answer. "A touching gesture. But unnecessary."

Janette shrugged in response. "Tradition."

"Ah . . . yes." He smiled and handed the flower to her, which she accepted. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

"Long enough," countered Natalie. There was some arrogance in him that annoyed her. She wasn't certain which was worse—his theft of the flower or his air of implied leadership. "There's a lot I have to take care of before . . ." When he raised an eyebrow at her inability to finish the sentence, she snapped, "I've got better things to do than cooling my heels in a cemetery, waiting for you."

"I'd appreciate a few moments of your time," he said. "As a courtesy. You have eternity, after all. Consider it a favor for a . . . blood relative." He gestured toward the earthen mound, and the gravestone.

Natalie's eyes fixed on it again. What a lie it was, those words and numbers preserved in stone, supposed to last through memory, into eternity. His name had been Nicholas—yes—but the surname had been an occupation, a vocation, as well as a statement of character. The birth date was inaccurate, but the date of death . . .

The last was all too real.

"We *are* tied by blood," repeated LaCroix. "A minute of your time—a question and an answer—and we'll be on our way. You can spare me that much."

Natalie looked up, trying to meet Janette's eyes. But Janette was silent, looking elsewhere. These past few days she'd depended on Janette for her survival. She'd thought her studies of Nick and his habits would have prepared her for such a rude awakening. But her death having been so unexpected, Nick not being there, and that fierce blood hunger . . .

Staring down at the whispering grass, then the silent mound of earth, she silently apologized to Nick for the hundredth time since she'd first feel the pangs, known the need for blood. And marveled at his ability to control it. How difficult it must have been, to have worked with mortals, walked with mortals, and not torn out the nearest throat to reach the warm blood flowing beneath the skin.

"It lessens, in time," said LaCroix. "You'll learn."

She looked up quickly, but caught herself before saying anything. He hadn't read her mind—just her expression. And he was right. Controlling the hunger, showing a guiltless face to the world, was a trick she'd master . . . in time. She owed him a few minutes, at least, before she returned home to wrap up what was left of her former life and decided what she was going to do.

His eyes had never left hers. After a moment, he looked away, back to the grave. "Will you stay?" "Here? Hardly." Natalie swallowed and clasped her hands together as he echoed her thoughts again—he was too good at this. But then . . . he'd had time to practice. "My resignation raised a few eyebrows, I suppose. But with Nick gone— There's no reason to stay. It would be safer to go somewhere else. Start fresh."

"Sensible." He glanced over at Janette, she almost thought she caught the flash of a smile between them. "And your family?"

"I don't think it's any of your business."

"You're right." LaCroix turned those cold eyes on her. "Humor me."

Natalie didn't flinch. She'd spent her life carving up the remains of the victims left by human predators—which, in a way, had helped her to understand them. Showing fear would be a mistake. "I'm not ready to deal with them, yet. A phone call. A letter, when I've resettled."

"Sensible. Again."

"There's only Sydney, after all. And Grace is taking care of him."

He raised an eyebrow at the name, but Janette sidled up to him, the flower in her hand brushing his shoulder as she leaned forward to whisper, "Her *cat*."

"Ah." LaCroix pursed his lips, then looked back to the gravestone. "So you've no real plans, then? You're welcome to join us. We are, in a sense, family. And there's much more you'll need to know, if you want to survive."

There'd been no warmth within her since she'd awakened, other than that fleeting sense of contentment and well-being that accompanied the blood. But his words sent a chill through her that she thought herself past feeling. There was so little she *did* know.

But to travel with them, as Nick had once done . . .

Reminding herself that Nick had spent most of his lifetime trying to escape LaCroix's reach, she shook her head. "Thanks, but I don't think so."

"It's your choice. Do keep in touch, though. I think you'd appreciate knowing when we've found him. Or . . . am I wrong?"

There was a sudden tightness in her throat as Natalie glanced back at the headstone and the newly turned earth. She refused to look at LaCroix, refused to give credence to what he was saying. "But Janette said—?"

"I only said that Nicola had died," said the soft voice, still hovering near LaCroix. "We do that all the time, when things become . . . difficult."

The grave was empty. Some sixth sense told her that, told her that the body in the coffin wasn't Nick. He was alive, somewhere else. The death, the funeral, had been arranged. He'd left this place.

He'd left her.

"Yes. He did, you know." Before thinking, she met LaCroix's concerned smile—which she knew wasn't all that concerned for *her* well being. "He brought you across. And then he abandoned you."

Again, she looked to Janette for confirmation and received a slight shrug in return. The blue eyes appeared honest. But appearances were so often deceiving.

"He told you to take care of me," Natalie guessed. A brief frown from Janette gave her the courage to add, "He couldn't stay. It was too public. They thought he was dead." Her gaze drifted back to the headstone. "That's why he had to die. And . . . move on."

It made sense, in a way. She didn't remember much about the night she'd died, or the way she'd died

for that matter. There'd been a call from a murder scene—she'd been on duty. It was down at the docks, near the warehouses. She'd remembered turning, to lock the car door.

The wooden pier had rumbled beneath her with the force of the blast—a boat berthed at the dock had exploded. There'd been a flash of light and a smell like pepper, then people scattering . . .

It came back to her as she stared at Janette. The light and the thunder of the moment drowned out everything, except the knowledge that Nick had been there, aboard the boat. For frantic minutes she'd gone from body to body, injury to injury, doing what she could, where she could, until she found him.

He'd crawled into the shadows of a bulkhead beneath the pier; she'd guessed instinct had sent him into hiding. Her heart had been like stone as she'd dropped her bag to the sand and fallen to her knees beside him. But it had started beating again when he'd moved. Nick's eyes had opened—

But they were red-gold, wild and unseeing . . .

"Yes," whispered Janette's voice, across the short distance. "He said—it was an accident."

Natalie swallowed and looked back at the grave. She'd assumed . . . she'd thought . . .

Closing her eyes, she heard Nick's voice in her ear, half-strangled with fear and anguish. "Forgive me—"

The darkness would give her nothing more. Her perfect memory wouldn't let her forget what came afterward—waking to that gut-wrenching thirst in the back room of The Raven. But before that . . .

Opening her eyes, she met LaCroix's gaze. "Where is he?"

"We were hoping you might tell us. But then, I guess he didn't have time to give you his itinerary. Our Nicholas' always been one for rushing into things. Or . . . away from them." LaCroix's smile was sharp. "I'll find him. It may take some time, but I'll find him. I always do."

Something inside her twisted at his words. Natalie looked at the dark tree branches against the night sky. Nick had spent so much time running away from what he was and what LaCroix wanted him to be. If she joined them, she'd become part of the chase. Which was only just, in that she was the reason he'd bolted.

Nick couldn't face her. Not after what he'd done to her. It *had* been an accident. But he'd add her murder to the countless others that weighed on his conscience. And then compound it with the fact that he'd brought her across, made her into something he despised . . . one of his own kind. He'd asked her forgiveness, but he'd never forgive himself.

Until she found him. And let him know in no uncertain terms that he wasn't going to hold the blame for this, along with the other things that weighed on his mind and his heart.

Then she'd tell him exactly what she thought about him running off, without an explanation, or even a good-bye.

They'd been silent, letting her work it out for herself. As she turned her head to face LaCroix again, she saw a satisfied smile on his lips—he'd known all along that once she realized the truth, there'd been no alternative. "When do we leave?"

"Tonight." He glanced over his shoulder, at Janette. "I think arrangements can be made. We'll have to travel light."

She made a face, then sighed. "I'll have everything sent after us. Why must Nicola always be in *such* a hurry!" Then she looked at Natalie, expression thoughtful. "We should feed before we go. She's hungry."

Natalie barely restrained the impulse to lick her lips and looked away. There was too much of her on the surface again. She'd fed no more than two hours ago and already she was ravenous. But she mumbled, "I can wait."

"You shouldn't. And you won't." When she stared at LaCroix, surprised at his solicitude, his gaze was

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even and steady. "We take care of our own. And . . . you're one of us, now." One corner of his mouth twisted upward, in a smile. "Forever."

"We'll see."

If anything, his smile grew sharper. When LaCroix and Janette rose into the sky, Natalie followed. Leaving behind the earthen mound, and the gravestone and her old life, her thoughts centered on finding Nick, thwarting LaCroix, and feeding the blood hunger. It was enough for now. And later . . .

Well, it might not end 'happily ever after,' but she didn't doubt that at least it would be interesting.

A KNIGHT IN HELL

By Susan M. Garrett

NICK LOOKED down at the paperwork on his desktop, then up at the clock. It was almost seven. Almost time. Why he'd ever agreed to do this was beyond him.

No, he knew why he'd agreed to do this. He owed Schanke. And if he said that it hadn't touched him to be asked to carry out this very special assignment, he'd have been lying.

A movement—out of the corner of his eye he caught the papers flashing by, the file landing on his desk. "Special delivery?" he asked, as Natalie plopped down in Schanke's chair, across from him.

"End of shift. Figured I'd dropped by on my way home." Gesturing toward the file, she added, "There's your night's work . . . unless somebody turns up a body."

"Schanke's night's work," corrected Nick. Smiling, he picked up the folder and deliberately reached across, placing it squarely on Schanke's blotter, adding, "He's taking my shift tonight. I've got a date."

"Have you?" Natalie looked away, toward the office door. "Washing your car again?"

"No."

"Then it's a real date? A real 'people' date?"



"Uh-huh." Nick tried to keep his expression neutral. "I'm escorting a young lady."

"Movie?"

"Ice cream parlor, actually."

That, at least, got her attention. Raising an eyebrow, she stared at him. "How young is 'young'?"

He shrugged, then looked down at the form on his desk again, but felt her eyes still on him. "Well, when you're eight hundred years old, the age thing—"

"Means a heck of a generation gap."

Nick looked up at her, tapping his pen against his cheek. "This doesn't bother you . . . me going out on a date?"

"Me?" Natalie's hand rose to her throat and hovered there a moment as she tried for an incredulous expression and failed. "Why should it bother me?"

"Good." Hiding a smile, Nick looked back to the paperwork.

"Where did you two, uh, meet?"

"It's something Schanke fixed up."

Natalie leaned across the desk, horrified. "You let Schanke fix you up with a date?"

Before he could answer, Schanke appeared in the doorway. Puffing, he staggered to the desk. "Nick—I'm sorry I'm late. But you know Myra. First she had to change her outfit three times, then we had to take pictures. Hope you're not too camera shy, she's got at least a half a roll left. And wait until that flash blindness clears before you head out of the driveway, okay?"

Winking at Natalie, Nick rose to his feet and lifted his jacket from the back of the chair. "Take it easy, Schank. And don't worry. I won't bite."

"Well, let's hope she takes it easy on *you*. She's one tough little cookie, you know."

"I know."

By this time, Natalie looked completely perplexed. She'd left Schanke's chair and was leaning against the edge of the desk. "I can't believe Nick's going along with this."

"Neither can I," answered Schanke, with an obvious air of relief. "You know, finding somebody you can trust is just so hard these days." He caught Nick's arm as he shrugged into his coat sleeve. "Where are you taking her?"

"Ice cream parlor?" offered Nick.

"Good. Great. That's her home turf, she'll be good there. Just—order something small for yourself. She'll try to outdo you."

"I won't be ordering anything, actually," said Nick looking to Natalie for help.

And she jumped in, despite the small frown she tossed in his direction. "That lactose intolerance still bothering you?"

"Ah, geez," said Schanke sympathetically. "Sometimes I think I'm the only guy on the continent keeping the dairy industry going. Still—" He pointed at Nick. "None of those big banana splits or anything. Maybe a cup of ice-cream, sprinkles—she likes the colored ones—a little hot fudge. No strawberries, it makes her break out in a rash."

Nick met his eyes and matched his grave expression. "No strawberries, check."

Schanke slapped him on the back. "I'm counting on you. You won't be the one up at three AM if she gets a stomach ache."

"I'm certain you'll be sure to call me."

"Damn straight I would." Schanke looked at the clock on the wall. "Okay, so by the time you pick her

up, it's seven. Say you get to the place—this and that—drive her home . . . back by eight-thirty."

"Eight-thirty?" asked Natalie, staring at Nick with wide eyes.

"Okay . . . nine," amended Schanke, taking her comment as a criticism. But he scowled at Nick. "She's got school tomorrow. And if she's not in bed by ten tonight, Myra'll *never* get her up and out in time for that bus in the morning. Which means I'll have to drive her—"

"Jenny!" exclaimed Natalie. When they both turned and looked at her, she cleared her throat and added, "You're taking Jenny for ice cream?"

Nick managed to fight back a smile and stared at her with a blank expression. "Yeah. Why? Who else did you think—?"

But Natalie wasn't buying any of it. She picked up the file from Schanke's desk, smacked Nick hard in the shoulder, so that the file folder creased, then turned her back to him and her attention toward Schanke. "What's going on?"

"It's a school assignment," said Schanke, as she handed him the folder. "It's some character-building thing. The kids have to interview someone they admire and write a report. Unfortunately," he cleared his throat, "it can't be a parent or a relative. And Jenny asked for Nick."

Nick ducked his head, uncomfortable when Natalie glanced at him, and shrugged, "She's gotten the idea from somewhere that I saved Schanke's life—"

"Which is true," pressed Schanke. "Besides, the kids have to go it alone—no help from parents or anything. And I don't think I'd trust my little girl to anyone else."

For the hundredth time since Schanke had talked him into this thing, Nick turned, the words at the tip of his tongue—he couldn't do this. He couldn't deal with this much trust, not with Schanke not knowing who he was. *What* he was.

But Natalie stepped forward, as if sensing what he was about to do. Taking his arm, she pushed him toward the doorway. "Then Mr. Hero had better get going. You don't want to keep your *date* waiting."

"Nine o'clock," called Schanke from behind them. "And the colored sprinkles!"

Again, Nick nearly turned, but Natalie kept him moving toward the door. "Nat," he whispered, "I don't think—"

"You're right—you *didn't* think. But you promised to do this. And you're going to break Jenny's heart if you cancel out on her at this late date."

She wasn't going to let him get away. Natalie stayed with him, marching him down the concrete steps at the front of the station and out to his car. But once there, Nick stopped and grabbed her arm. "I've got a great idea—why don't *you* go? You're a hero, too. You help us catch the bad guys. I'll drive you over there—"

"Oh, don't tell me you're afraid of spending a couple of hours with an eight-year-old girl?" When he turned away from her and leaned on the side of the car, he could hear the wonder in her voice. "My God, you *are* nervous, aren't you?"

"Of course I'm nervous. I have a right to be nervous. And if Schanke had any idea of what I am—"

"He knows *exactly* what you are," said Natalie. But when Nick turned, horrified, she folded her arms and added sternly, "You're his partner. You're his friend. He trusts you with his life every night you go out together. And he trusts you with his daughter." When he looked away again, she laughed lightly. "Nick, it's a school project. She'll ask you a couple of questions. She'll eat some ice-cream. And you'll take her home. If it's any consolation, I bet she's more nervous than you are."

"Yeah?" Not quite believing, he dared a look back at her.

And Natalie was smiling. "If I was eight-years-old, and I had to ask my dad's good-looking partner a bunch of stupid questions and my mom had been fixing my hair for an hour and taking pictures . . . I'd probably have a stomach ache *before* the ice cream."

"Maybe you're right." Reaching out his hand, he touched her cheek. "Thanks, Nat."

"Just get her home by nine," she warned, as he opened the driver's side door of the Caddy and slipped behind the wheel. "Schanke's going to be a basket case until you get back here and if he doesn't get a call from Myra by nine—"

"I know, he'll try to talk Stonetree into putting out an APB on us." He turned the key in the ignition, then paused, looking at her.

"What?" she asked, hands on hips.

"I was just wondering—your mother did that to you, didn't she? Fussing with your hair, dressing you up, took pictures."

Natalie bit down on one side on her lip and looked away. "Yeah. She did. I hated that damn bow."

"Any chance those pictures are still floating around somewhere?"

"Are you kidding? They had blackmail potential—I burned the pictures *and* the negatives. And you're stalling."

When she moved to smack the side of the Caddy, Nick held up his hands in surrender. "All right, all right—don't hurt the car. You're right. I'm stalling."

"You'll do fine."

"Yeah. Maybe." Nick looked out the windshield, then back at her. "One more question?"

An eyebrow arched, she eyed him suspiciously. "What?"

"You really think I'm good-looking?"

Gritting her teeth, Natalie pointed toward the car. "If you're not out of here in ten seconds, I'm starting with the tires. Then the fender. Then the hood—"

"All right. I'm goin', I'm goin'!" Nick checked to make certain Natalie was clear of the car and let the engine roar to life. In his side and rearview mirror, he could still see her standing in the parking lot, her shaking fist turning into a wave—which he returned as he sped away.

He thought about what she'd said as he made his way to Schanke's house and some of his nervousness eased. After all, it *was* only a few hours. He'd done well enough with Lisa and he'd had to keep her entertained *and* protect her from Mafia hit men. This was only a school assignment. He'd done a quick review of his current bio, just in case, so she wouldn't catch him off-guard. He had nothing to worry about, really. Other than a possible sudden illness on his car upholstery.

But, as he pulled up into the Schanke's driveway, Nick realized he'd forgotten completely about Myra and her camera. The flash had barely faded before he managed to blindly place the car in park and turn off the engine, while shielding his eyes from a second assault. "Myra—would you wait until I'm out of the car, at least?"

There were spots of light blotting out random portions of his vision, but these were fading enough for him to see that Myra was smiling sheepishly. "Sorry, Nick." She slung the camera strap over her shoulder. "Guess I just got carried away. Jenny's just getting her stuff together, she'll be ready in a second." As soon as he was out of the car, Myra looped her arm through his, walking with him up to the house.

He smiled and shook his head—it never failed to amaze him how completely Schanke and his wife had accepted him. Despite the convenient excuses that countered every dinner invitation or afternoon barbecue, they never stopped asking. It both pleased him and made him very uneasy, that he could lie to

these people so easily in the face of their friendship and kindness. But if he didn't lie . . . they'd never accept him for what he really was. They couldn't.

"Don said I should have her home by nine," said Nick, after a moment's pause. He reached forward and held the door open for her. "If that's all right—?"

"That's fine. And I bet he belly-ached about having to drive her to school. Twice in three years she's missed the bus, both times when he's been on double shift. I offered to drive, but—you know Don."

"Yeah. I guess I do." Nick stuck his hands in his pockets, again uneasy. The Schanke home was . . . comfortable, lived-in. But there was a clean, cared-for scent to the place.

Myra headed toward the living room and Nick followed as far as the doorway from the foyer, where he leaned on the sill. "You want a cup of coffee?" she asked, picking up a coloring book and crayons as she moved past an end table.

"No. Thanks anyway. And I—I'll get her home on time."

"I know you will." Myra turned toward him, looking down at the box of crayons in her hand. "And I should thank *you*. I know you've got better things to do than take on our daughter for an evening. When they gave out that assignment, they sent home a letter about being careful about who we sent our kids with. Seems like—seems like when I was a girl, things like that didn't happen. We didn't have to worry about that stuff, where I was from. But now," Myra looked up at him, puzzled, "we can't seem to get away from it. We're always telling our kids to be afraid, watch out, don't trust anybody. If they can't learn to trust adults, what are they going to be like when they grow up? Who will they trust?" Then, she shook her head, as if embarrassed at speaking her thoughts aloud. "Don't mind me, Nick. It's just that . . . my baby's growing up."

"You're doing better than Don," he promised, smiling.

She laughed and took the camera strap from her shoulder, setting the camera on the end table. "You should have seen him! He was driving Jenny crazy." She walked past Nick and over to the stair railing. Looking upward, she called, "Jenny? Nick's here." Then she turned toward him and leaned against the stairwell. "I'm not looking forward to the teen years. Once the phone calls begin, the boys start dropping by—you *know* Don's going to be impossible."

"He *did* say something about sending her to a convent when she hit sixteen," admitted Nick, with a grin. Then he looked upward, at the sound of running footsteps along the upstairs hallway, and sobered. "Doesn't hurt to be careful. Like you said—things are different now. You never really *know*. Anybody."

"Great. The entire precinct'll be staking out every boy in the senior and junior class." Myra laughed again, this time at his serious expression. "I know it's occupational hazard, Nick, but you should learn to lighten up. I won't take Don food shopping any more—I think he spends half the time checking out the other shoppers against his wanted felon list. And I end up with a cart full of cookies. Jenny, *would* you hurry—"

She came down the stairs at a run, slowing only as she spotted Nick. There was that shy smile, maybe a little more shy than usual, that offset her freckles. Her eyes were large and brown—definitely from her mother—but her hair favored her father. And Nick knew her attitude, from the few times he'd spent more than a few minutes with Jenny, was pure Schanke.

His unease started to fade when he noticed that the fingers she'd clasped around her notebook were almost white. Natalie was right, Jenny was as nervous as he and with far less reason. Her, "Hi," was small and soft and scared, accompanied by a nervous tug at the bow barretted at the side part of her hair.

The bow removed any further dread in him, Natalie's words again echoing in his memory. "Hi, Jenny. The dress—the dress looks nice."

She looked down at the dress, then back at him with such a long-suffering look that he understood immediately—the sooner he got her out of the house and away from Myra and Schanke's proud-parent routine, the happier she'd be. "You ready to go?" he added quickly. "Your dad's kinda put a curfew on us . . ."

"Oh, let me get the cameral" said Myra, turning and dashing back into the living room.

Taking a breath, Nick walked over to the stairwell and leaned against the banister. "Think we should make a break for it?"

Jenny shook her head. "No. Mom's pretty fast. And she doesn't give up. Dad left his badge one night and she chased the car for a block before she caught up with him at the stop sign."

He nodded toward the notebook. "Got some tough questions in there?"

She shrugged, then smiled. "Naw, it's pretty easy stuff. Can we—can we leave the top down on the Caddy?"

Nick matched her grin. "Already down."

"Cool."

By this time, Myra had returned, camera in hand. She got off one shot before Nick walked toward her, his stomach turning at the thought of even more photographs being taken. Sure, they were family album photos, but time was beginning to teach him the folly of leaving too much evidence behind him. "Why don't I get a shot of you and Jenny?" he asked, reaching for the camera.

It was the right thing to say. Myra relinquished the camera without a murmur and, after another three or four pictures finished off the roll, he was able to get Jenny out the door and into the Caddy. She clipped her seatbelt in place carefully—Nick didn't bother checking, the very audible click meant that it was secure. Then, with a wave to Myra, they were off.

Jenny was quiet and, as he glanced down at her, seemed almost lost in the Caddy's seat. For an instant he envisioned Lisa there—he'd barely been able to keep the seatbelt on her. Lisa was used to being on her own, trying to act like an independent adult, while Jenny, who was obviously on her best behavior, probably had more attention and love and daily care than many children her age. Both children, both the same age, but so . . . different. And then there had been that other child, brought to mind by Lisa's presence—Daniel. He'd never answered Natalie, had he? When she'd asked about what had happened to Daniel, they'd been interrupted. Would she have been so dismissive of his nerves tonight if he'd told her what *had* happened—

It was the sudden shriek of brakes that broke him from his reverie, the past memories slipping away and out of reach as reality intruded. The traffic light was green—he had right of way. The Caddy moved not forward, but sideways, metal grinding and groaning against metal as a fierce jolt sent him smashing against the driver's side door. The seatbelt caught and held him as the Caddy was slammed into a parallel car, traveling in the opposite direction. He looked into the driver's eyes, saw the metal buckle toward the man, but the car's momentum tore it away, onto the sidewalk, where it wrapped around the suspension pole for the traffic light.

Those few seconds stretched into an eternity as every scream and screech and cry of flesh and metal sounded, horns blared, lights flashed, glass crashed and cracked—he threw his arms up before his face as the windshield of the Caddy shattered. It was like being inside a bullet or in a metal canoe tossed on invisible rapids. Speed somehow compressed time and terror and violence.

Until, for a second, there was only silence. Dimly, he knew that a horn was blaring somewhere. And the occasional tinkle of broken glass falling to the street.

Nick sat, stunned. Despite the seatbelt, he'd been thrown against the wheel of the car, but, touching

his chest, he realized that the bruise was already healing. For a moment, he stared at his hand as it came away wet, covered with blood. But it wasn't his blood.

The smell of it made him hungry and afraid. He hadn't turned, hadn't looked at the passenger seat. It was as if some part of him had known and tried to keep him blissfully ignorant. But reason was returning and if the courage to face what he knew had happened wasn't available, the inevitability of it forced him to look.

The passenger side door had bowed inward, snapping the seat belt . . . or perhaps the catch had been loose. It didn't matter. Jenny had been thrown forward into the windshield, then pulled back by some remnant of the strap still attached to her. Her head lolled at an awkward angle, one arm twisted aside so that the bone gleamed through, yellow-white. Her dress—and what remained of her features—were covered in blood. There was no heartbeat, no breath.

The lack of those things deafened him. Nick shut out all other sounds—the still blaring horn, the cries of passers-by coming to help, the screams and moans of the injured all fell away, ignored. He leaned toward her, reached out his hand to touch her bloody hair. An inner fist closed over his heart and his throat. He couldn't even manage to say her name aloud.

There was no point. She was beyond hearing.

In this world.

Nick was aware of a presence beside the car door; a teenager approached, T-shirt torn and bloodied. "Hey, mister, are you—?" The boy looked down in the car, catching sight of Jenny's body. "Oh, Jesus!"

"Don't touch her!" cried Nick. Wrenching off his seatbelt with a single pull, he scrambled to a kneeling position on the seat. "Don't . . . touch her."

The boy backed off, staring at him. That's when he realized that the world was colored by a golden glow. His eyes—his eyes must be blazing. And his fangs . . .

Nick closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to drive back the smell of the blood, the pain, the hurt—but it was useless. By the time he opened his eyes, the boy had run away. And, from his vantage point, he suddenly began to realize the scope of the carnage.

The car that the Caddy had smashed into was wrapped around a telephone pole—blood dripping from the twisted metal hulk into a pool just beside the remnants of the driver's door. Another car had been flipped over, but a woman stood beside it, arms wrapped around herself, her expression blank as someone else seemed to be talking to her, trying to help. The car that had been in front of him was pulled to the side of the street, with nothing worse than a smashed trunk, it seemed. And what had hit him from the passenger side—

It was a delivery truck, less than twenty feet away. The grill was smashed and pushed back. The driver was being helped from the cab of the truck by two people.

Again, he looked down at Jenny, his hand reaching out to touch her, then stopping. Swallowing back whatever had risen in his throat, he climbed over the seat into the back of the car, then up and over the folded top and trunk to avoid the jagged metal collision edges on either side of the Caddy. Nick jumped to the ground, his hand reaching inside his jacket for his badge.

For some reason, that was important. He had to remember that he was a cop. Metro Police. This was a crime scene. A crime had been committed.

Jenny had been murdered.

Both of the people helping the driver backed away as he held up the badge—or maybe it was because his shirt and jacket and face were spattered with blood. The driver slumped against the side of the van. Nick reached a hand to steady the man, suddenly realizing that he, too, was spattered with blood. But as he moved closer, he smelled the alcohol.

Beer. It was a sour, rank smell. No one else might have noticed it, not just then. But he could smell it. The heaviness of it hit him hard enough to make his stomach churn—he turned his head away.

And remembered the green light. Not amber . . . but green. The Caddy had the right of way. The driver had run a red light. The driver had been drunk, had run a red light.

Jenny was dead.

The rage roared to life, climbing up through his chest and setting his mind ablaze. Throwing his badge to the ground, he tightened his hold on the man's T-shirt, then tore the shirt at the collar, exposing the neck. He sank his teeth into the murderer's throat.

The blood was an afterthought. It felt good enough going down, but it fanned and fed the rage within him. It deafened him once again to the shrieks and screams around him, this time quite close and filled more with fear than pain. He let the rage, let the *beast*, feed. And when the body was drained and his fingers released the cloth and already cooling flesh, the rage had begun to ebb.

Only to be replaced by fear.

A crowd had formed. He looked up, seeing the world through a red haze, snarling at the people who pointed and stared and ran. They didn't know that Jenny was dead. They didn't care. He was the only one who knew, who *cared* . . .

The wail of an approaching siren made him start. Glancing back to his car, Nick realized he had to tell Schanke. He had to tell him before word went out on the air. For the man to lose his daughter—that wasn't something you should hear on a police radio. But his radio was smashed, covered with Jenny's blood.

The crowd parted quickly as he ran toward them, snarling; they scattered like sheep in a field when the wolf attacks. No one tried to grab him, or stop him—they'd seen him, seen what he could do. But still, he ran to seek a quiet place, an alley or fire escape. He had to get back to the station. He had to tell Schanke.

That thought took him into the air, helped him stay aloft. The night was red and black—only second sense and a feeling of home helped draw him through the darkness and to the station. When Nick saw the lights from the parking lot and the building facade, another chill ran through him. The rage had begun to fade and the hollow place it left behind was so cold and dark . . . He'd lost something.

His badge. He'd lost his badge. He wasn't a cop anymore. This wasn't home. It was gone, it was all gone.

But they'd let him in. They'd let him tell Schanke his daughter had been killed. If they had any sense of humanity, they'd know that he had to do it. *Only* he could do it.

He'd flown to the station before, but never had he been so careless about landing in plain sight. Touching ground in the parking lot, he headed toward the front entrance of the 86th Precinct at a run.

"Nick?"

The call came from behind him—Natalie. Nick paused for a second, frozen. Closing his eyes, he bowed his head and bent slightly, hands on his knees, needing to breathe, needing to fight back the gold in his eyes, his fangs. What was he doing? He was about to walk into the station in full fury.

Natalie's steps—she ran across the parking lot—were like drumbeats in his ear, clear against the smaller night sounds of traffic and insects. "Nick? What are you doing back here? I was just on my way home—" Her voice hesitated as she drew close to him. "Oh, God—Nick? What happened?"

He straightened and opened his eyes, looking away from her—but the gold had fallen away, the beast was tamed despite that blood that had soaked into his coat and jacket, the dried flakes that still clung to his skin. Nick looked down at the ground, unable to meet her gaze on even a mortal level. "There was an

accident—a drunk driver.”

When he'd gotten up the courage to look at her, Natalie was staring at him, eyes wide in horror, her hand covering her mouth. There was a sound from her, but nothing intelligible.

“Jenny's dead.”

His stomach knotted, twisted, as he spoke the words aloud. And the horror in Natalie's expression changed, softened to empathy, to sympathy. “Oh, Nick. I'm so—I'm so sorry.”

She placed her arms around him and he hugged her, held her tightly, knowing that the sympathy was for him, as well as Jenny. She understood what this meant to him. She was the only one who *could* understand.

And it helped a little to know that, to have her in his arms for those few seconds and to share that great grief with her. But she pulled back and he saw something else in her, some strength and sense of self-possession. “Does . . . have you spoken to Schanke?”

“That's why I'm here. I have to get to him before they put it out on the air.”

“They won't announce it.”

Nick broke from her embrace and took a step backward. “No, but they'll run the Caddy plates. The description of the car, the fatality an eight-to-ten-year-old child—he'll put it together, Nat.” He headed toward the concrete steps, calling back over his shoulder, “That's what Schanke's good at. And I—I have to tell him. He can't hear it that way”

“Nick—no! You're in shock. You don't know what you're—”

By that time he'd reached the front doors of the station, only dimly aware that Natalie was following him. The entryway, oddly enough, seemed the same. Norma was seated at the front desk, gave him a greeting, turned back to her computer screen, then looking at him again, staring. Another cop—two cops—who were standing to one side of the information desk moved forward slightly, their eyes on him.

“Where's Schanke?” asked Nick. He walked toward Norma, toward the information desk, focusing only on her. “Norma, I *have* to find Schanke. Where is he?”

When she didn't answer at first, he turned and walked to the squad room door. Stonetree was at the door to his office, speaking to someone. He glanced over at Nick, then stared. But Nick looked past him, checking by line of sight—no sign of his partner.

“Captain, have you seen Schanke?”

“What the hell happened to you?” Stonetree stalked across the squad room, moving faster than Nick would have thought possible. “Nick? I thought you were out with Schanke's daughter?”

“I was.” For some reason, he felt his lips twist into a smile. Nick tilted back his head, tears welling up behind his eyes, but he fought them. “There was an—uh—accident—and—”

“Sit down,” ordered Stonetree, pushing him back into the entryway, toward the bench beside the door. “Someone get me some medical help. And get the info on that accident—we got anything on the air yet?”

“Schanke isn't here.” Nick stared at Stonetree, as if daring him to contradict the statement.

And Stonetree met his stare evenly. “He took a break, went around the corner—said something about getting more film for Myra.”

“Myra.” There was a tightness in his throat and he looked away, back toward the door. Natalie stood there. She took a step toward him, but he lifted his hand, gesturing for her to stay where she was. “He isn't in his car, then. He hasn't heard. I have—I have to tell him.”

“Captain?” came a call from one of the uniformed officers. His eyes on Nick, he walked up beside Stonetree, then turned his back to Nick, saying something in Stonetree's ear that Nick wasn't supposed to

hear.

But Nick was a vampire, and the words were clear—"We just got a call on a traffic fatality—could be Schanke's daughter, the description matches Nick's car. And there's a report of . . . Christ, I dunno. Some of the witnesses said Nick flashed his badge, grabbed the driver of the truck that hit him and—"

Stonetree's eyes were fixed on Nick's, his lips barely moved as he whispered the question. "What?"

"Bit him. Ripped his throat out."

Stonetree never flinched. "Hysteria," he answered.

"But they've got a positive ID. Nick *killed* the guy—"

With the barest movement of his hand, Stonetree stopped the officer from saying anything more. Putting a hand on the man's shoulder, he pushed him slightly away, then took a step toward Nick. "Is that true?" he asked, in a voice so soft that only Nick could hear.

"Yes," he answered, fighting to keep the word from becoming a snarl, struggling to keep the gold from his eyes, his fangs falling into place as the beast rushed through him again. The taste of human blood still lingered in his mouth, the shame of his own failure was on his tongue and burned his soul.

Stonetree moved closer, pushing Nick toward the bench, turning him to face the wall and Nick realized why—Stonetree *knew*, as Natalie did. Stonetree knew what he was.

"Don't lose it now," whispered Stonetree. "Or you're gonna make a bad situation a whole lot worse."

Behind him, there was the sound of a gun leaving a holster. Nick started at the quiet noise, but Stonetree's fingers tightened on his arm, stopping him. "You've worked too hard to lose everything now."

Nick looked up, met those knowing eyes . . . and looked away. "No. It's too late. I have to find Schanke. I have to tell him—"

It was as he turned that he heard another gun taken from a holster. He looked back at Stonetree.

"They're not going to let you leave," said Stonetree grimly. "They can't. You know that."

"You know . . . I can't stay."

Stonetree gave the barest nod. "I know. But I can't let you hurt the family, Nick. I'll do what I can for you, but I have to draw the line somewhere. The line starts here. And it ends here." He held out his hand. "I need your gun, Nick. And your badge."

"My badge—I don't have my badge." He looked up, at the faces he knew as friends and co-workers. Some of the expressions were sympathetic, others disgusted, and still others . . . were afraid.

The fear burned the worst, feeding the hungry beast in his chest. The rage hadn't left, but was resting, sated by blood. And now it threatened to overcome him again, daring him to attack them, daring him to free himself, to complete what he'd set out to do. He had to find Schanke, didn't he?

There was a sound from behind him—Natalie. "Nick, give him the gun."

His back straightened at her voice, he'd almost forgotten she was there. But her words gave him an edge against the beast, her presence was a strength he could draw upon. Slowly, carefully, his left hand raised at shoulder level, Nick opened his jacket with his right hand, pulling it aside to reveal his holster.

That's when he realized that Stonetree's hand had begun to waver, that a thin line of sweat had formed along the Captain's brow. Frowning, he opened his mouth to ask—

And Stonetree grabbed his left arm with his right hand, falling against the wall. Without having to listen too hard, Nick heard the irregularity of the heartbeat, the sudden stops and starts. "Heart attack," he heard himself whisper. Then, turning to Natalie, he repeated, "Heart attack—"

She pushed past him to reach Stonetree, as the man slid down the wall. Another cop approached, but Nick snarled at him, and he backed away. Natalie needed room.

He heard someone place the call to the EMT's, heard the muttered conversation around the squad

room and the entryway—bits of words and sentences flashing past, floating away and drifting back. The sound of agitated heartbeats thundered in his brain.

"Detective Knight?"

He looked up and found himself facing a beat cop. The man had moved closer to him, his weapon was drawn. "I'll have to ask you for your gun, sir. And—if you'll please step away, over here."

There was another cop moving to his right and a third coming around the back of the desk, to move in on his left. They were trying to catch him, stop him from telling Schanke. He couldn't let that happen.

This time, when he snarled, the room turned gold. A gasp, a half-scream, and more than a few scattered oaths went through the room as he showed his fangs, turning to the officer on his left, moving forward. If he could scare them, make them back off—

But he heard shots. His body jerked to one side as he felt the slugs enter, well below his heart and his ribs, then exit through his back. Or, at least one did—the other felt like it hit a rib.

Nick looked up, surprised, at the young beat cop who stood in front of him, gun held straight out. Two shots. Two bullets. There had been no warning. Sloppy. Very, very sloppy.

He looked down at his jacket, finding the bullet holes. Two shots—one bullet in him, and one . . .

Nick turned, only to see Natalie straighten. She stared at him, eyes wide, mouth open—but again she had no words. And this time, she fell.

He caught her by instinct, his arms going around her. And when he pulled his hand away from the wetness in her back, he found it covered in blood. He stared down at her eyes, heard the small gurgle and wheeze of a breath from her lungs—but it was her last breath. The air was leaving the body. The heart had stopped. The life was gone.

Her eyes were fixed. And empty.

The weight of her body was suddenly too much to hold. Nick lowered her to the bench against the wall, moving with her. "Nat?" He listened for the heartbeat, for the smallest flutter of life.

Nothing.

His fingers trembled as he reached out, closing her eyelids carefully. She was dead. They'd killed her. Just like Jenny. They'd killed her.

Behind him, there was sound and fury and motion. Someone was calling his name, talking to him, yelling at him—

With a scream, Nick whirled, his vision colored by crimson. The beat cop, the one who'd shot Natalie, was closest. He closed his fist over the man's hand, crushing it against the metal of the gun. The gun went off, into the ceiling or the wall, it really didn't matter. But the gun fired again, and then once more, as he felt the bones snap beneath his grip, heard the screams of the young cop, who stared at him with terrified eyes.

Another approached him from the left and he swung his arm, knocking the man back and into the wall with one blow. The others had disappeared back behind the desk or retreated further away to some place of safety. His hands around the young beat cop's throat, Nick lifted the man into the air and threw him over the desk.

And, as he stared at the crimson-tinted carnage, he realized that he could still save Natalie. There was a chance . . . but he didn't dare try it himself. Janette could bring Natalie back, could bring her across. If he could get Natalie to Janette—

A slug ripped into him as he turned and lifted her body from the bench, but it didn't stop him. Another slug slammed into the bullet-proof glass of the precinct door even as he reached for the handle,

but that, too, was ignored. Once outside, he grabbed the metal handle of the door and twisted it upward, letting the weight of Natalie's body rest against his shoulder. The door jammed in place—they wouldn't be able to get through it right away. It would give him time.

Because he needed time to save Natalie. He had to get to Janette.

Shifting her body in his arms, Nick pressed his lips against Natalie's forehead—her flesh was already cold. There was so little time left. But Janette could do it, *would* do it. There was little she could refuse him. She would give him this one thing, it was only a matter of how he asked.

Nick walked down the steps of the precinct, then reached the sidewalk. He looked upward, into the sky. He could fly but . . . he felt safer on the ground, for the moment. His car was—was gone. And Natalie's keys had probably been in her handbag, which was still inside the precinct. Behind him, he heard the banging on the the precinct door—they were trapped inside, just as he was trapped outside.

Still, his time as a mortal police detective hadn't been totally in vain. Walking toward Natalie's car, he tried to remember everything he knew about hot-wiring the new electrical systems. A wire here and there—it wouldn't be too difficult.

Her car doors were unlocked. Nick leaned forward and grabbed the handle to open the door, then stepped back and pulled carefully—he didn't want to tear the door off its hinges. Once the door was open, he slipped Natalie inside, then reached over her to clip the seat belt in place.

The action made him think of Jenny. If he'd checked her seatbelt—would she still be alive?

Closing his eyes, he shook his head, driving the thought, and the red hunger that accompanied it, from his mind. He leaned on the outside of the passenger side of the car and took several breaths, looking away from Natalie, away from the memories of the night. He had to stay in control, had to remain calm, to save Natalie.

The sound of a whistled tune caught his attention. Looking up and around, he tried to track the sound, then spotted Schanke. His partner—ex-partner—was strolling along the sidewalk back toward the precinct, tossing a small brown paper bag up in the air and catching it. Nick didn't recognize the tune Schanke whistled. It was enough that he knew the attitude behind it—Schanke hadn't heard about Jenny yet.

Reaching a hand inside the car, he touched Natalie's shoulder lightly—a promise to return. Then he started walking toward Schanke, his steps slow and weighted with leaden guilt.

Schanke saw him before he could speak, starting. "What? Nick? Are you back—"

Nick spoke quickly, before Schanke could take in his appearance, the blood that covered him and the bullet holes in his jacket. "Schanke—listen to me. There's been an—an accident."

They were only a foot apart by then. Nick reached out, catching Schanke's arm at the elbow, as his partner stared at him with wide eyes. Those eyes moved quickly, taking in the clothing, the appearance. He could almost see the tone of his voice, the facts begin to register in Schanke's mind. "It was a drunk driver," Nick continued softly. "Jenny's dead."

Disbelief first. So much so that Schanke only managed a strangled sound, a slight shake of the head, his eyes turning away, as if looking for visual confirmation.

"Jenny's dead," repeated Nick. Schanke's eyes turned back to him, asking him to say anything, to pretend that this was a joke, that it wasn't happening. "It was a drunk driver. He ran a light, plowed right into the Caddy. I never saw him coming, Schank. But I took care of him. He paid for it. I never saw him. We had a green light—"

He was rambling. He knew it. But Nick couldn't stop. He saw the brown paper package fall from Schanke's fingers to the sidewalk, heard it hit, but tightened his grip on his partner's arm.

"You . . . killed my little girl?" asked Schanke, bewildered. "You killed my baby?"

The words rested on his skin like acid and burned inward, searching for his soul. Nick released Schanke's arm, turned sideways, unable to look at the man. "It was a drunk driver, Don. It wasn't my fault. It couldn't have been my fault." Not like Natalie was his fault. And she was waiting for him, in the car. "I've—I've got to go."

Schanke's hand shot out, punching his shoulder, pushing him back. "Answer me, dammit! You killed my baby, didn't you?"

There were sirens in the air, quite close—all reserves were being called in. Glass breaking meant they were on their way through the door. They'd try to take Natalie away from him, shoot him so full of holes they'd incapacitate him for a while—long enough to doom Natalie. He had to get away, while there was still a chance of saving her.

"Don't push me," Nick muttered, beneath his breath. He looked back at Schanke, forcing the gold back from his eyes, panic starting to take hold of him again. "It *wasn't* my fault. I got the guy, Don. I got him."

"What do you mean, you *got* him?" Again, Schanke stared, but understanding lit his eyes, and horror. "Christ, Nick, you *killed* him? You killed the drunk driver?"

"He murdered Jenny! What else could I do? If he'd gone to court, they would have suspended his license for what—a year, six months?" Now it was Nick's turn to stare, why couldn't Schanke understand?

The sirens were closer. He could hear voices. They'd be discovered in a moment. And it was as he looked back, toward the precinct building, that he heard the snap, felt the metal go around his wrist.

Looking down in surprise, Nick realized that Schanke had cuffed him. The metal shone bright against his blood spattered skin. He looked up at Schanke—

And saw that his friend, the father of the little girl who'd been killed in the car, had become a cop again. There was an unbearable sadness in Schanke's eyes, but there was that uncaring steel there, too.

"I had to tell you, before you found out," explained Nick, the disbelief now filling him. "I thought—I thought you had to hear it from me. That it would destroy you if you heard it on the air, or if someone at the station— But, it didn't matter, did it? *She* never mattered. Not more than this. Not more than making the collar, solving the case. Jenny's dead!"

"Let's go," said Schanke, pushing his shoulder, leading him toward the front of the precinct building.

Lifting his cuffed hands, Nick shoved back. "Don't *push* me," he repeated angrily. The beast was rising in his chest—he could feel it, but he no longer tried to fight the gold from his eyes. He backed up a step, glancing over his shoulder, toward the car. "I've got to go, Schanke. I'm sorry, but . . . I've got to go. Nat needs me."

When he looked back, Schanke had drawn his gun. And there was fear in his eyes, too, now that he'd seen the gold, seen the fangs. "Nick? What the hell—what the hell's happening? What *are* you? What kind of a monster *are* you?"

He had to get back to Natalie. There'd be no time to hot wire the car. But Schanke had a car

Easily snapping the chain that linked the cuffs together, Nick held out his hand. "Schanke, I need your car keys. I have to save Nat, but my car was wrecked and hers—I don't have her keys. I need your car."

"You *did* kill her, didn't you?" accused Schanke. He held out the gun, ready to fire, as Nick approached. "You killed Jenny. And I—I sent her with you. I *gave* her to you. My God"

There wasn't time to explain or to plead. Nick took another step closer, hand outstretched, the chain dangling from the cuffs on his wrist. "I need the keys. Now. Give them to me."

Nick tried to meet Schanke's eyes, to force his will upon his partner, as he'd been able to do before.

But this time Schanke was too distraught, too unfocused. The gun steadied as Schanke said, "Nick, get back, or I'll shoot."

He took another step forward. "Schanke, I need to save Nat. I need your car."

"Nick—"

He wasn't certain, couldn't have been certain, but he thought the finger on the trigger moved. Lowering his head, he plowed into Schanke. The gun went off, firing into the night as he and Schanke fell backward, toward the sidewalk. Training kicked in—he grabbed Schanke's gun hand and smashed it down against the concrete. The gun spun away as Schanke yowled in pain, kicked at him, tried to hit him.

Keys. He needed keys. Nick placed one hand on his partner's throat, pressing hard, pinning him to the ground, as he dug into Schanke's jacket pockets. He couldn't meet his eyes, couldn't look at the face, ignored the hands that pressed at him, the sputtering sound that came from Schanke's lips. Muttering, "Keys," over and over, like some demented mantra, Nick finally found them in the left jacket pocket.

Grinning, he held them up in the air and looked down—

Schanke's eyes were wide open, staring sightlessly. "Schanke?" he whispered, tapping his partner's face with his hand. "Schank—stop kidding. Okay?"

But the tongue lolled from the side of his mouth, his hands lying flat and open against the sidewalk. In horror, Nick stumbled up and away, suddenly realizing that his hand was covered with wet-fresh blood—which matched the puddle on the sidewalk, beneath Schanke's neck. He'd pressed too hard. He'd crushed Schanke's neck. He'd broken his spine. With one hand, he'd strangled his friend.

And he'd never noticed.

A roar arose within him. He threw back his head and let it run outward into the night, the sound echoing in the silence. Nick closed his eyes, swaying on his feet. What was he doing? What the *hell* was he doing? Jenny, the driver, Stonetree, Schanke, Natalie—

Natalie.

The thought of her, the car keys in his hand, and the cries of voices searching for him caused his eyes to open. Ducking down behind a parked car, he hid just as the police officers began to arrive. In the confusion of lights and sirens, the discovery of Schanke's body, he made his way among the parked cars, keeping low, hoping they hadn't yet found Natalie in her car.

They hadn't. He remained low as he unbuckled the seat belt and shifted her into his arms, the fresh blood on his hands making his task more difficult. But he managed to maintain his hold on the car keys. And he thanked whatever stars were watching over him that Schanke's late arrival that evening meant that he'd had to park at the far end of the lot.

He knew how they worked, knew he had seconds to spare as he again buckled Natalie into the car seat, this time closing the passenger door and scuttling around the front of the car. Once in the driver's seat, he turned on the police scanner, but left the lights off, not wanting to attract too much attention. The keys worked in the ignition, the blood on them didn't seem to matter as he turned over the engine, then tried to slip out of the parking lot unobserved.

They tagged him at the lot entrance, but Nick gunned the engine. He hoped that Schanke had gotten around to bringing in the car for a tune-up as he twisted the wheel hard to the right, then left again. He lost the right front headlamp, but managed to disable the police car that was trying to block his path. A quick look in his rearview gave him a feeling of relief—both of the officers in that car were climbing out, unharmed.

Good. He wanted no more mortal blood on his hands tonight.

Nick's attention wavered between the traffic that flowed around him and the messages on the police

scanner—they were trying to track him. All precincts had been warned that he was armed, dangerous, and possibly had a hostage.

Hostage?

He looked over at Natalie, at her pale skin and closed eyes. They didn't know she was dead. And she wouldn't be, for long. He had to reach Janette. Janette would help him. She always helped him when things went bad.

Only . . . nothing *this* bad had ever happened before.

He knew the streets, knew the car placements, knew how they'd try to hunt him. From the short comments spoken over the scanner, they were planning to ambush him at his loft—good, let them think he was heading home. They'd no idea he was heading for the Raven.

By knowing where to stop, where to pause for a moment and what streets to use, he made it to the Raven without being spotted. Nick parked the car in the side alley, away from the casual sweep of the streets, which would begin once someone actually started thinking about what they were doing. He left the keys in the ignition, half-hoping the car would be stolen and lead the blue and whites on a diversionary chase. Walking around the car, he opened the passenger door, removed the seatbelt, and lifted Natalie in his arms.

He walked down the sidewalk, toward the door of the Raven. Smiling grimly, he looked down at Natalie's face—she looked asleep. And she *was* asleep, in a sense. Janette would awaken her for him. He didn't dare try it himself, not after his own two dismal failures, with Richard and Elizabeth.

The bouncer snarled at him, as he entered. He snarled back, not bothering to hide his fangs or his anger, and the bouncer backed away, surprised. Wordlessly, he walked through the crowd of dancers, who stopped as he passed them. Silence fell, with the exception of the music, which continued in the background. Whispers and comments dogged his heels as the dancers caught side of him, moved aside, or pulled others out of his way.

The vampires in the crowd looked at him with angry or fearful eyes. The mortals were confused, not knowing whether this was a floor show—some odd spectacle they were meant to enjoy—or something that they'd watch the next evening on the news.

Janette appeared before him, stopping his progress through the club. She took in the scene with one glance—him, covered with blood, the handcuffs on his wrists, Natalie in his arms. Her eyes were wide and full of sorrow as she whispered, "Oh, Nicola. It *would* come to this" Then she passed him, her fingers brushing his cheek, as she once again became the no-nonsense manager of the night club. "There's been an accident," she announced. "When the emergency people come, please let them through." She gestured toward the bouncer, who crossed the dance floor toward her, then turned back to Nick and placed her hand on his arm. "A booth."

Nodding, he followed her lead, content to let someone else make decisions for the moment. Once he reached the booth, Nick gently sat Natalie upright, then slipped in beside her. He placed his arm around her, so that her head rested against his chest and shoulder. Touching his lips to her forehead again, he noted that her skin was even cooler. There wasn't much time. And, distantly, he heard Janette give instructions to the bouncer.

"Tell the others to take what they will—they won't have another chance. They can leave from the roof for now, though there's better cover in leaving with the crowd."

Nick looked up, meeting the bouncer's gaze. The vampire growled at him, showing golden eyes and fangs. But Janette put a manicured hand on the bouncer's chest, turning his attention toward her. "It's over," she said sharply. "Like all things, it's only a matter of time." Her smile forced, she reached up to

touch the vampire's cheek, then kissed him lightly on the lips. "There'll be another place, another time. So, go. Tell the others. There are only minutes."

The bouncer's eyes lingered on hers. He nodded, glared at Nick, then turned. Nick watched the vampire make his way through the smoke-filled club, stopping this dancer or that. After a word in one ear, or another, they slipped away, behind the curtain that led to the back rooms. It was done deftly, without alarm or confusion. But again and again, the bouncer turned to glare at him across the room.

"He doesn't like me," whispered Nick, meeting that hate-filled gaze.

"Of course not. You've destroyed his world. He's never had it happen before. And, perhaps, it's just as well they experience it while they're still young. It's a survival skill they must learn." She leaned on his shoulder and stared down at him. "Nicola, what *am* I to do with you?"

He met her eyes, those blue eyes he knew so well, and tried to smile. "It's all gone wrong."

"So I see." She gestured toward Natalie. "What happened? The short version, please. We haven't much time, from the look of your bracelets—unless your tastes in 'play' have changed."

He brushed Natalie's hair with his fingertips, staring down at her. "Someone tried to shoot me. She was standing behind me—I didn't realize. The bullet—"

"Went through?" When he didn't look up, he heard her sigh. "I told you this playing mortal would only bring you grief. You realize, we must leave now?"

"Yes. There's nothing for me here, anymore." Then he looked up. "Janette, you have to bring Natalie across before we go."

Her hand fluttered to the collar of her black dress, to her throat in surprise. "Me?"

"You know I can't. I've *tried* and it hasn't worked. I won't risk her." He raised his hand, grabbing her wrist. "You must. If you have any love for me, you *must*."

Her hand rested on his, pressed against his fingers—he realized that he was squeezing her wrist too hard and released her, quickly. But Janette continued to stare down at him. "You've phrased it badly, but I expect that of you by now, Nicola. All right. let me see."

She leaned past him, her fingers reaching out to touch the side of Natalie's face, her neck. And then she withdrew quickly, holding her fingers to her chest as if burned. "You didn't kill her?"

Nick looked up in surprise and annoyance. "No! I'd *never* hurt her."

"You've done well enough by not trying," whispered Janette. When he looked back down at Natalie, Janette's finger touched his chin, turning him toward her. Her hands on either side of his face, she leaned toward him. "Nicola, she's dead. She died of the gunshot. She's been dead all this while. I can't bring her across. She's gone."

Her words were spoken in a soft and gentle tone, but the content ripped at his heart like a knife. Disbelieving, Nick reached up and grabbed Janette by the throat, hissing, "Liar! You're jealous of her. You've always been jealous of her. You'll do this for me or I'll kill you. I swear, I'll *kill* you!"

The rage rushed through him, the beast had been brought to life again. Janette's eyes widened and he saw gold, heard the beginnings of her snarl—

Then they both heard the sirens from outside, even above the music of the club.

So, assumedly, did the other vampire patrons. They all looked up at the sound, looking for guidance, for instructions—from Janette. She wrested Nick's hand from her throat and turned, just at the bouncer approached. "Tell them to go," she ordered sharply. "Clear the club. You stay till the last. Bar the front and the rear and leave by the roof. Have you set everything else in motion? There'll be nothing left?"

The bouncer nodded, avoiding Nick's gaze. "Yes, of course. A match should do it. But you . . . ?"

"Will be out in time, not to fear." The wail of the sirens grew louder—now the mortal dancers had

realized that something was wrong and had begun to stop in their tracks, looking around and at one another in alarm. "Have someone tell them Nick's here—he's armed, and has two hostages. Tell them he's got the club rigged to explode. It'll buy me some time."

The bouncer glanced over at Nick, then back at Janette. "They'll look for bodies—"

"So take three mortals—two women and a man. They won't be missed. And they'll be charred beyond recognition." She, too, glanced at Nick, raising an eyebrow as he stared back blankly. "Go. Take care of it. I'll see you later."

"Yes. All right."

This time, the bouncer didn't look behind him as he walked into the crowd. He said something above the music, shouted some words, and people began to scream. There was a mad dash for the door, but he caught the arms of two women, gesturing at another vampire to waylay one of the men.

A knot tightened in his stomach, but Nick looked down to Natalie in his arms. He continued to stroke her hair, pressed his lips against her forehead again. He had to save her. He *had* to.

Janette was beside him, her hand on his shoulder, her chin resting against the top of his head. "After all this time, you're so willing to toss your scruples away for her? How I've underestimated that. You love her that much, Nicola?" Moving down to his level, she smiled, touching his chin with her fingertip. "And what I would give to have you feel that way for me."

She leaned forward, lips touching his. And, as they parted, he whispered, "You'll save her, then? For me?"

Some darkness clouded her eyes, some sadness, but Janette didn't look away. "Yes. All right. But we must leave here, first. If it's to be done right, we must get to safety."

Nick looked down at Natalie, touched her cheek. "She's so cold. What about time—?"

Leaning forward, Janette caught his hand and brought it to her own lips. "She has eternity. But only if you get out of here, now. Go to the roof. The helicopters—?"

By this time, the club had emptied. Even the bouncer had gone. "Choppers," corrected Nick absently, his gaze going back to Natalie.

"Choppers. The police choppers will take a moment more—we must be out and across the roof before they arrive. There are five buildings beside one another, then a leap across an alley, then five more and a warehouse I own—I have a bolt hole there. They won't find us. And I've enough money and papers to get us far away from here."

He looked from her, to Natalie, and back again. "You'll bring her across, then? When we reach the warehouse?"

"Yes. But we must reach it first, no?" Releasing his hand, she gestured toward the back of the club. "Go. I'll be with you in a moment. I have to end this—remove any traces of our presence."

Rising to his feet, Nick walked toward her. He took her hand, kissed the knuckles, then drew her close and kissed her on the lips. "Thank you," he whispered, between kisses. "Janette, *mon coeur*, thank you."

After a moment, she put a hand to his chest and pushed him back. "Oh, how I wish we had time for this," she said breathlessly, staring into his eyes. "But . . . we don't. Take her, Nicola. Be safe. Or I cannot do what I must, now."

Catching her hand again, he kissed it once more, muttering, "Thank you." Then he ran to the booth and lifted Natalie easily in his arms, his heart light for the first time since the beginning of that horrid evening. He ran for the back room, but paused at the doorway as Janette called his name.

"Nicola?" When he turned, she smiled and blew him a kiss. "The warehouse. Don't stop, don't wait for me, all right? I'll be right behind you. And, know that I'll always love you, *mon coeur*."

Smiling, Nick turned and headed to the back stairway that led to the roof of the building. The door had been left open by the other vampires, many of whom had no doubt fled with their few possessions that way as Janette had instructed.

It wasn't anywhere near midnight. Under the light-lacking gaze of the new moon, shadow ruled more often than not. He, too, followed Janette's instructions, running across the flat rooftops, leaping the brick casements that separated building from building as he might have crossed the stone battlements of a castle centuries before. The leaps across the alleys were like short flights. And, as he ran and flew, he hugged Natalie close to him, trying not to jostle her. She could feel nothing now, but she would soon enough, when Janette brought her back across. And then the three of them would be free to walk the world, to walk the night.

The warehouse he found easily enough. Nick paused on its rooftop, then leaned down and rested Natalie against the brick and wood outcropping that held the door. He turned and looked with wonder at how far he had come from the Raven in so short a span—he wasn't winded and yet he could barely make out the rooftop from where he stood, even with his preternatural eyesight. Joy and light filled him at the thought that he might have succeeded in saving some brightness from the dark hell of this night. Janette would save him.

She always had.

The flash, when it came, was almost brighter than the sun. Instinctively, he raised his hand to his eyes, covering them. And the sound that followed thundered and rumbled so much that even the roof on which he stood shook beneath his feet, endangering his footing.

At that instant, he heard Janette's scream in his ears, short and clipped, and filled with pain. And a knife blade drove beneath his ribs, into his heart.

That was what it felt like. His knees gave way and he fell to the rooftop, gasping. Tears came to his eyes and he reached a hand down to the rough gravel to keep himself from falling. Inside, a damp emptiness seemed to swallow his soul.

Nick looked up, despite the glare of that bright fire and the smoke that poured from the Raven, billowing gray against the distant sky. He knew full well that Janette was dead.

It was then that her conversation with the Bouncer began to make sense. Of course, she had to destroy the resting place of the sleeping vampires, the stock of human blood that fed them all, the records of her purchases and her clientele. While he had thought only of himself, of Natalie, Janette had kept to the Code and protected the others of their kind. The explosion had been of such a nature that there would be little evidence left and none of that would make sense to the fire and police investigators. They'd been told that he'd wired the place to blow. And they'd assume that a cop had gone mad, that the car accident and Jenny's death had finally tipped him over the edge and that he'd gone on a rampage.

It would be as good an explanation as any. And he had a feeling that the bouncer from the Raven would take care of his loft, as well. He was bound by duty to the Code, to Janette, to make certain the others, the secret existence of the vampires in Toronto, would be safe.

Resting his forehead down against the gravel, he let his bloody tears fall. Had she tried to get out and misjudged the timing? Or had Janette known she wouldn't escape the fire and flames? Either way, she'd saved him, she'd sent him out deliberately.

She'd left him alone.

And now . . . Natalie couldn't be brought across. Unless he did it himself.

Pushing himself up from the rooftop, he struggled to his feet, wiping away the gravel that clung to his skin and his clothing. He turned, gazing at Natalie, where he'd left her by the doorway to the building

below. He knew what had happened before. It had happened with Richard, and Elizabeth before him. They'd become more than mortal and that change had unleashed some madness within them. They couldn't control themselves, couldn't be controlled. And this was what he might do to Natalie.

There was a way to make it work. His own existence, and Janette's, had proven that much. If he stayed with Natalie, watched her, cared for her, kept her on a tight rein until she regained control of herself and made peace with what she was . . . would she be all right, then? Was that the key to it? Had LaCroix been right all along, that acceptance was necessary to survive, to *thrive* as a vampire?

Closing his eyes, Nick hung his head and thought for a moment of his master, his teacher. It was too late to make amends, but this thing he would do and do it right. He had to take the chance of bringing Natalie across. Without her . . . he had nothing left. He was alone.

And that he could not survive.

The gravel on the rooftop crunched beneath his feet as he made his way to her side. He stood, staring down at her for a moment, then knelt beside her. There was blood all over her, from his having carried her, shifted her—it had rubbed off from him. Jenny's blood, the driver's blood, Schanke's blood . . . and now he would give her his own. She'd be reborn in blood. Not the most auspicious of beginnings.

Reaching out, he brushed the hair from her neck, moved the collar of her jacket and blouse, baring the skin. Tears gathered at the corner of his eyes, and Nick muttered a plea for forgiveness. From Natalie, from whatever God might have doomed him to this hell. He closed his eyes and let the blood scent overwhelm him, let the beast free, one hand resting on the wall behind her, steadying him as he prepared himself.

When he opened his eyes, he saw her bathed in a golden glow, like an angel. Snarling, he opened his mouth, reared back to sink his fangs into her neck, into the cold flesh—

And stopped. Pushing back from the wall, he landed on the gravel and covered his eyes with his arm, hoping to hide himself from the night, from Natalie's dead gaze, from his own shame. He couldn't do it. If he should fail, she'd have to die again. And he couldn't bear that. It would be better to stalk the darkness alone, than to give her back some form of life and have to take it from her, to see her warped and twisted beyond repair and then have to destroy her because she couldn't be what she was.

"Is this how far you've fallen, Nicholas? Feeding from corpses?"

The sound of the voice stunned him. Nick dropped his arm from his eyes and stared at the darkness.

His footsteps, as he crossed the gravel, were the light tread of the dead, but still solid. This was no ghost, no phantasm of his maddened brain. It was LaCroix.

His master reached his side, then squatted down next to him. He was dressed in a long, leather coat, wearing jeans and a shirt. His boots were polished to perfection. And his eyes were clear and cold.

Nick met that gaze, expecting to find death there. Surely, LaCroix must want him dead, destroyed. It would be right, since he'd risen against him, tried to destroy his master, *thought* he'd succeeded.

But if there was death inside those eyes, it was not intended for him. Rather, there was a sudden stillness, a silence of life. And Nick knew that his thoughts of LaCroix were not the only movements on the strings that bound them, that had brought him here this night.

"Janette—" he managed.

LaCroix nodded, once. Then he rose to his feet and turned, looking out to where the smoke still billowed into the air, from the burning Raven. The light of the fire lit the eastern sky. "Yes. I know." He looked over his shoulder and down. "I assume you're the cause of this. You always are."

Nick flinched, even though the comment was more observation than accusation. As he struggled upward to his knees and then his feet, he caught sight of Natalie. And he realized that he hadn't failed her, after all. "I want to ask you . . . a favor."

"A favor?" LaCroix raised an eyebrow, then looked back to the fire, hands clasped behind him. "The last time you asked me for something, and I gave it to you, you claimed that I tricked you. No. No, I don't think so, Nicholas."

"But . . . you must." He walked to LaCroix, placed a hand on his shoulder. When LaCroix met his gaze, stared at him, he removed his hand quickly, as if burned. "Please. You have to bring Nat across. I asked Janette, but there wasn't time—"

He couldn't finish the sentence, couldn't get past her name. But LaCroix half-smiled and nodded, as if he understood. He left the vantage point and walked back toward Natalie. "Do it yourself. You know how. You *do* don't you?"

Nick swallowed, then looked away. "I've tried, yes. But . . . they go mad. I can't control them."

"Small wonder, when you can't control yourself." Another observation. LaCroix lifted a finger to his lips and raised his head, looking down at Natalie. "No. I don't think so."

"I'll do anything, promise you anything. I'll follow you anywhere, do anything you ask, when you ask it." LaCroix looked at him in surprise and Nick dropped to his knees before him. "I'll swear fealty to you, again. I won't betray you, won't resist you. I'll become what you want me to be. If you save her. If you bring her across, let her be what she was."

Laughing, LaCroix walked by Nick, touching his shoulder briefly as he passed. "And this was all it would take? Complete surrender . . . for this?" He leaned against the wall and looked down at Natalie. "Perhaps my methods were wrong, at that. To have let you love . . . that would have been the answer. I was a fool not to see it."

Nick rose to his feet, wet his lips nervously. "You'll bring her across?"

"If only out of curiosity. You've fought me for eight-hundred years. I'm almost desperate to meet the woman for whom you're willing to give up everything." LaCroix's eyes grew cold and hard. "I'll hold you to your oath, Nicholas. I've worked at this too long not to. You've no reservations, knowing that?"

"Bring her across."

LaCroix shook his head, smiling again. "Remarkable." Then, sliding down the wall, he crouched beside Natalie. "Let's begin, then."

Nick stood where he was, not daring to move, to make a sound. It was shameful, this—letting Natalie become one of LaCroix's blood, giving her to LaCroix. But if it was the only way she'd come back to him, it would have to be done. And if she faulted him for what he'd given to LaCroix in exchange for her return to this world, he could live with that, too. As long as she was here. As long as she was still with him.

There was silence, the night shaken only by the distant sirens and sounds of chaos at the Raven. LaCroix seemed not to notice the background noise. He touched the side of Natalie's neck with the tips of his fingers, then frowned. He reached his hand to her face, feeling her cheek, touching her chin. Then his hand moved downward, to her heart.

Frowning, he looked up at Nicholas. "She's been shot through the heart."

He nodded. "Yes. From the back. The bullet . . . went through me."

LaCroix shook his head, then touched her cheek again. "I'm sorry, my dear," he said, kissing her cheek lightly, "but we're not destined to meet on this side, I'm afraid." Then, he rose and faced Nick. "It can't be done. If she'd been bitten, if you'd killed her . . . yes, there might be a chance. But she died the instant her heart stopped. There's no life in her—it's fled some hours since. I'm sorry, Nicholas. It's too late."

He stared, the words sinking in slowly. "No. You have to bring her across. You *promised*."

"And I'd very much like to, especially after your oath. I would have won through her. But now—?"

He shrugged, then leaned against the wall, head turned to watch the smoke from the fire. "She's as far from you as Janette. She's gone."

Nick flew at LaCroix, his hands going for the vampire's neck, to strangle him. "Liar!" he screamed. "Liar!"

Startled only for an instant, LaCroix pushed Nick back roughly, freeing himself. His eyes blazed gold and his smile was sharp and fanged. "Perhaps I've won after all. You've nothing left, have you Nicholas? Nothing . . . except me."

Nick stumbled back, his own eyes taking on a golden glow. He stared at LaCroix, enraged. "You *could* bring her back. You *can*. And if you won't—I'll kill you."

"Then you'll be alone." LaCroix took a step toward him and Nick backed away. "Is that what you want? Janette is dead. And now this woman? And you've killed others tonight. I smell human blood on you, on your breath." He advanced a few steps more, still smiling. "I *have* won, haven't I? You've killed and fed. There's still hope for you."

The beast was free within him. Nick saw the world go red, but he clenched his fists and stood his ground, as LaCroix approached. "Will you bring her back? Yes or no?"

LaCroix held out his open palms. "I told you, it's not possible. And even if I could . . . I'm not certain I would. Not *now*. I've won. I'm all you've got left. You'll follow me because you have no other choice. The story of what you've done tonight will spread like wildfire. The others will shun you. I wouldn't be surprised if the Enforcers might begin to look for you."

Not even the mention of the Enforcers could shake him. Nick steeled himself, ignored the words LaCroix spun around him like a web, to trap him. He waited for his answer.

Placing a hand on his shoulder, LaCroix gestured toward the fire, then walked around him. "If you had any real courage, you'd have stayed with Janette, would have burned in her place. Because you're too wild to let loose now, Nicholas. They'll destroy you, to protect the others. And the only one who can save you, is me." He leaned close, whispering in Nick's ear. "Ask me that, and I'll give it to you. Ask me to save you . . . and I will. For the same price you offered before. Absolute loyalty. Complete obedience. Let me make you into what you were meant to be, Nicholas."

He heard, but did not hear. And as he turned to LaCroix, and saw his eyes, he realized that LaCroix hadn't lied to him. LaCroix would give anything for what he offered. He simply couldn't give what Nick wanted. He *couldn't* bring back Natalie.

And if LaCroix couldn't do it . . .

Ignoring his master, Nick walked back to Natalie. Kneeling down on the gravel covered rooftop, he took her in his arms, kissed her closed eyelids, her cold lips. He held her close. And he knew that he hadn't any answer left. Every avenue was closed to him. Even LaCroix, in returning from the dead, could not help her, could not help him.

There was a hand on his shoulder. He looked up at LaCroix.

And LaCroix released him, took a step back, as if alarmed. "You've lost your reason, haven't you?" He tried again, replacing his hand on Nick's shoulder. "No—no games today. I think you'd be more than happy to let me leave you here, to let you wander the world, engulfed in your own pain until you starve or the Enforcers find you."

"It's over," answered Nick. He tightened his grip on Natalie. "If you've any mercy, you'll kill me now. Have done with it. End the games. End the misery. Let me go."

A slight smile quirked around the edges of LaCroix's lips. His hand rose to Nick's face. With a flick of a finger, LaCroix brushed away a speck of blood that clung to his cheek. "Ah, but I couldn't do that, could

I? I'd be alone, then. Come, Nicholas. I'll save you. I'll set things right. Leave her and come away with me."

He buried his face in Natalie's hair, murmuring, "No."

"I can make you come with me. But . . . I don't want to push you further." There was steel in LaCroix's voice. "Come, Nicholas. Leave her. Come with me."

LaCroix's hand fell back to Nick's shoulder, tightened on it. And Nick felt something pull inside him, something strain and wrap itself around his senses and his brain. The command was an imperative, not to be ignored. At any other time, he'd have not been able to resist that hold on his mind and his being.

But his heart was still his own, and, broken as it was, it remained untouched by LaCroix's imperative. If anything, the beast within him raged against this intrusion, raged against the despair and anguish being pushed aside. He snarled and released Natalie. Before LaCroix could move, Nick turned and struck him, hard against the face.

He'd fell well on human blood tonight, the first time in a long time. The blow knocked LaCroix back, angered him enough so that his eyes turned red and burned brighter than the light of the fire from the Raven. He flew at Nick, knocking him back into the wall, hands raised to his throat, to choke him.

Despite the red of his eyes, Nick sensed that LaCroix was holding back—to subdue, *not* kill. But Nick had no such restraint or intention. Bringing his arms up between them, he broke LaCroix's hold on him and barreled toward him, pushing him back. As LaCroix staggered, Nick lowered his head and ran at him again, knocking him across the roof, toward the power box and building generator.

The thrum of the old unit was low and quiet, drowned out by their snarls and the echoes of the blows they exchanged. LaCroix grabbed Nick's arm, hurling him against the chicken wire and light wood that fenced in the unit. Nick took the construction to the ground with him, struggling up out of the wire that wrapped around him, unable to get his bearings. When his vision cleared, he saw LaCroix standing over him, a long piece of the wood in his hand, held like a spear.

But LaCroix didn't strike. He held the wood against Nick's chest, bearing down on it just enough to pin him in place—one move and the sharp stick would go through him, into his heart. He dared not even taken an unneeded breath.

"Now, will you come with me?" demanded LaCroix.

This was what he wanted—oblivion. Nick leaned back against the roof and the wire, letting his hands fall to his side. "Do it!" he hissed, through fangs and golden eyes. And, when LaCroix hesitated, the gold fading from his gaze and uncertainty replacing the look of anger and desperation, Nick moved upward, hoping to impale himself.

But LaCroix had sensed what he would do and dropped the wood. It clattered to the rooftop as LaCroix stepped back, staring at Nick, shaking his head. "You've gone mad," he whispered, as in disbelief. "You *have* gone mad."

It was as LaCroix turned away that Nick realized that this second request, one which was in LaCroix's power and could easily be accomplished, was going to be denied. Shredding the chicken wire as he rose, he ran at LaCroix, pushing him forward. The momentum carried LaCroix out of Nick's hands, into the generator.

There was a flash, and sparks, and fire, as the generator began to flare and flame. LaCroix stumbled away, engulfed by fire. His scream was that of the damned, so loud and clawing the Nick placed his hands over his ears, deafened by it. He froze, unable to quite comprehend why LaCroix was burning, how he could stop it, or why he should.

And then he realized that the burning was his answer. To touch LaCroix, to embrace him, would be to

burn himself. And that would end it. The stake and the fire, those were the ways to be rid of this hideous existence. Picking up the wooden spear from the ground, he stalked toward the place where LaCroix had fallen, was trying to extinguish the flames by rolling on the ground.

The skin was already blackened and the fire resisted the effort to smother it. There was still some sense left in LaCroix, despite the pain and the flames, there had to have been. For when he saw Nick approach him with the wooden stake, he fought his way to his knees, then to his feet. The evening breeze whipped the flames around him into full fury. He stared at Nick through that flicker, across the darkness and the distance that grew less with each step.

LaCroix took to the air. He flew. High and bright and wild, he rose upward, like a comet or shooting star, into the night sky. Nick stared, astounded, the flames growing stronger with each inch, each foot, the oxygen giving the fire substance, feeding it so that it burned red, then blue, then white hot around LaCroix. He moved to follow—

But that's when he realized that LaCroix was falling, plummeting downward. There was no control to this, no sense or logic. It was the fall of an inanimate object, a dead thing.

The pain of it hit him much as Janette's passing had done—a sharp knife between his ribs. But this time it was darker, deeper than before, tearing at him, setting him alight inside. As if a fist closed over it, the feeling was extinguished. And the dark, wide void inside him grew wider and darker and more still and cold than death itself.

Nick had fallen flat to the roof of the warehouse when the sensation hit him, when LaCroix had finally left the world. In wonderment, he shook his head—how could he have believed LaCroix was dead before, when he had felt nothing like this? With Richard, with Elizabeth, there had been sadness, yes. But they had not been with him as long, had not been so tied to him. He should have known it would be like this, LaCroix should have taught him, should have told him.

There were so many things LaCroix had never told him.

Like the limitations of bringing someone across, when they'd died from something other than the bite of a vampire.

Nick remained where he fell, sprawled on the gravel, for hours. His mind wandered over time and place, over things that he had done or not done or had done badly. But as hard as he tried, he could not think of one thing that he had yet to do. It was over. It was all over. He was alone, now. And, LaCroix had been right in that it would only be a matter of time before the Enforcers, or another of the vampires, destroyed him for his actions. There was no future. Only seconds, minutes, perhaps hours or even days. To exist.

Not to live. To exist.

It was that thought, and the thought of the passing hours, that finally forced him to his feet. Again, he brushed the gravel from him. And, again, he returned to Natalie.

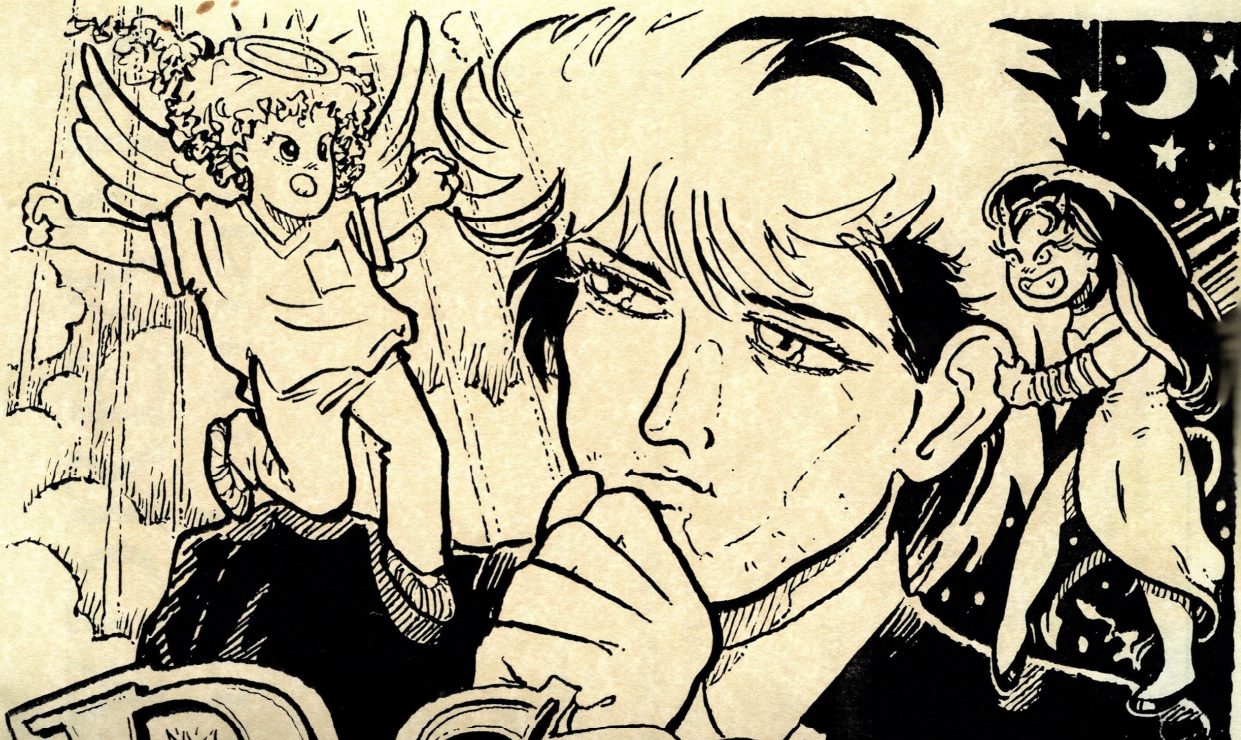
Her body had begun to stiffen and had the stench of dead meat about it, but he sat beside her, his back against the brick and wooden wall, and held her in his arms. Stroking her hair, he talked to her. Spoke of the life they might have had, if she'd found a cure for him, if he'd become mortal again. Of the children that might have been born of love and lived and grown, in sunshine. Of the time they might have spent, in mortal pastimes of painting picket fences and cutting lawns and planting flowers. Of the years that would have passed, as naturally as all things did and do, until the end would come for them.

Nick talked to her of all these things, talked to her until his throat grew dry and sound no longer passed his lips. Then he thought what he could not say, knowing that she would hear him. For, as the first rays of sunlight warmed his skin, in the instant before the burning started, he could still see. The beauty

of it, the sheer grace of the light, led him to hope that a God who had created such a thing would have mercy enough not to damn him both in this world, and the next. That hope, and the possibility that he might yet speak those words aloud to Natalie and have her respond, filled him with such light—

That the burning was not so bad as he could possibly have imagined.

Indeed, it was worse.



Daydreams

LETTERS

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